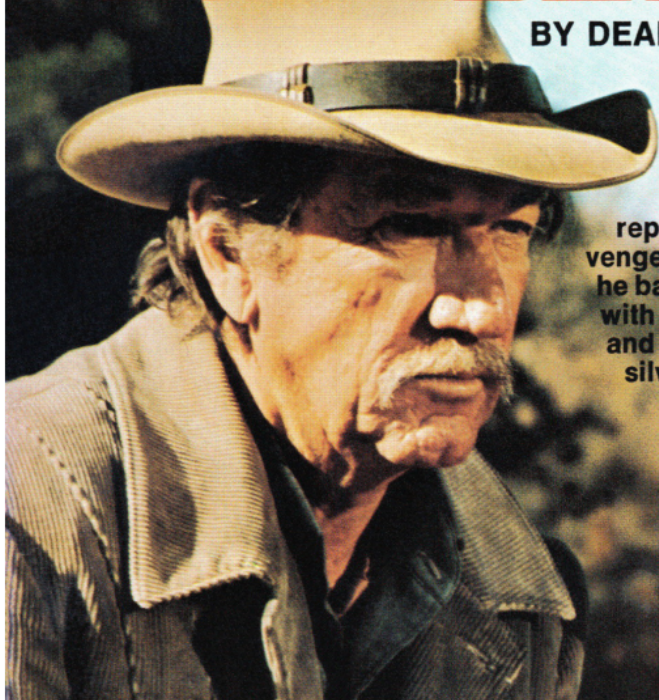


Action-packed western adventure
based on the exciting NBC-TV series
starring RICHARD BOONE as...

HEC RAMSEY

BY DEAN OWEN

He had a
reputation for
vengeance. And
he backed it up
with a fast gun,
and a deputy's
silver badge!



HEC RAMSEY

He was big. He was tough. He was deadly. He was Hec Ramsey, a hard-bellied, fast gun who lived his life on the edge of danger.

Some said he was a licensed killer. Others said he was a man of justice. But either way, gunslingers and holdup men hated and feared him.

Ramsey rode into New Prospect, the newest town in Indian Territory, as Deputy Chief of Police. He was met by a band of stagecoach robbers, a double murder and a land-hungry oilman who had never let the law interfere with getting what he wanted.

SHOWDOWN ...

“Ramsey, you’re the one who brought my buddy in to hang!” Dobbs cried.

Hec drew a deep breath, feeling a flicker of tension down his spine. His eyes locked on Dobbs. He made his voice tough. “Your friend had his trial. The *court* hung him!”

“That so? Well, there ain’t no court here but me. And I find you guilty!”

Dobbs jerked his gun free and fired. But Hec had anticipated the move. Dropping his carpetbag an instant before the gun fired, he spun around. The bullet ricocheted from one of the brass strips that bound the trunk. He drew a snub-barreled Colt from his belt holster and snapped off a shot before Dobbs could fire a second time.

The impact of the slug spun Dobbs around. He took a backward step, then collapsed into the street. His bootheels kicked helplessly several times, raising small puffs of dust. Then he was lifeless.

HEC RAMSEY

Dean Owen



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AWARD BOOKS are published by
Universal-Award House, Inc., a subsidiary of
Universal Publishing and Distributing Corporation,
235 East Forty-fifth Street, New York, N.Y. 10017.

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**HEC
RAMSEY**

Chapter One

From the seat of the jolting flat-bed wagon, Hec Ramsey studied the group of loafers near the railroad station. When he was certain that there were no familiar faces in this whistle-stop Texas town, the corners of his mouth relaxed. He wore a gray suit of the sort that was stylish in 1901, with his trousers stuffed into the tops of his high Texas boots.

The driver of the wagon swung his team to the side of the unpainted, one-room station. "Told you I'd git you here before the train come," he said with a trace of pride.

"You did, Sam. And here's your dollar." Hec handed the man a silver dollar, shook his hand, and stepped to the rear of the wagon. He picked up a bulky carpetbag and a brass-seamed footlocker.

A porter clambered down the steps of the baggage platform. "Lemme give you a hand with that trunk."

Hec Ramsey hoisted the trunk to his own shoulder. "I'll handle it myself, friend."

"Better let me have the trunk. It looks heavy. I got a baggage truck yonderly."

Hec shook his head and started for the station, where a four-car train was just rumbling into town on the spur line.

"Must be somethin' mighty valuable inside," the porter persisted, "if you won't let me carry it." He squinted up at Hec, who had the small trunk balanced on his shoulder, carpetbag swinging from his right hand. "Mebbe it's fulla dishes an' you're scared I'll drop it, huh?"

"My friend, did you ever hear of Pandora's box?"

"Who's she? It is a she, ain't it?"

"Never mind."

Hec turned for a final look at those who had come to watch the train arrive. He was aware of a sudden silence. Of course, there was still the whooshing sound of the engine that had come to a stop beside the station. Horses at the hitchrails still snorted and stamped feet against hardpan. But the silence that alerted Hec Ramsey was caused by the sudden cessation of voices. A moment before, men had been laughing in high good humor, shouting at those about to board the train.

Where there had been a fair-sized crowd, drawn by the excitement of train day in the drab little town, there now seemed to be only one

man. The rest had scattered and were looking on apprehensively from a safer distance, their eyes round.

In the center of the street, a lean man in range clothes stood stiffly. His sweat-stained hat was pushed back, his right hand rigid near the cedar grips of the gun. A .45, Hec's practiced eye noted.

"Marshall" the man cried in a challenging voice. "Step over here!"

There had been something vaguely familiar about the beaklike nose, the bony face. A face now flushed with anger. Now Hec recognized him. "I'm not a marshal anymore, Dobbs. Even you know that!"

"Far as I'm concerned you're still Marshal Ramsey!"

"Things have changed since then," Hec said into the ominous quiet.

"You're still the one brought my buddy in to hang!" Dobbs cried.

Hec drew a deep breath, feeling a flicker of tension down his spine. He was vulnerable—the trunk was on his left shoulder, the carpetbag in his gun hand. His eyes locked on Dobbs. He made his voice tough. "Your friend had his trial. The *court* hung him!"

"That so? Well, there ain't no court here but me. And I find you guilty!"

Dobbs jerked his gun free and fired. But Hec Ramsey had anticipated the move. Dropping the carpetbag an instant before the gun fired, he spun around. The bullet ricocheted from one of the brass strips that bound the trunk. Hec felt the shock of it clear to his heels and nearly stumbled. A second shot ricocheted off the trunk as Hec dropped the carpetbag into the street. He drew a snub-barreled Colt from a belt holster and snapped off a shot before Dobbs could fire a third time.

The impact of the slug spun Dobbs around. He took a backward step, then collapsed into the street. His bootheels kicked helplessly several times, raising small puffs of dust. Then he was lifeless.

As the onlookers stared in awe at the ruggedly built former marshal, a man stepped forward to bend over Dobbs.

"Dead," the man announced.

"Even before he hit the street," Hec murmured. He showed more sadness than triumph as he holstered his gun and picked up his carpetbag from the dust. The blast of the train whistle was a startling sound at the scene of death. Hec took a final look at the dead man crumpled in the street, shook his head, then plodded toward the train, the trunk once more balanced on his shoulder, the carpetbag swinging again from his right hand.

A rush of steam from the engine hid him from sight for a moment. He boarded the train quickly and placed the carpetbag and trunk on the seat beside him. He reloaded his gun, scowling as he thought of

the fool Dobbs, a petty thief who had run with a bad crowd and had never been caught.

Well, he was caught now, for sure. Hec stared at his reflection in the dirty train window as the town sped past. Soon they were out on flat land, the train rattling along the ribbon of track, a plume of black smoke trailing over the caboose and three passenger cars.

Hec closed his eyes and thought of what lay ahead. His exit from the last town had been tragic. Would his entrance to the next one be equally violent? At his ultimate destination he would not be unanimously welcomed, that he knew. In his years of helping to keep the peace on the frontier, he had not exactly been received everywhere with open arms.

Tilting his hat down over his eyes, Hec tried not to think about the new problems he would soon be facing. And he tried to forget the image of Dobbs. It was not easy to erase from his mind. At last, unable to nap, he straightened in the seat and stared out at the vast stretch of lonely land.

It was some hours later when Hec Ramsey got his first glimpse of Perry, the last city before they reached the end of the line. It was a new city just seven years old, but the population had already swelled to twelve thousand. A boom town. The train slowed with a screech of brakes, halted. Hec stepped from the train, his trunk, with its fresh bullet scars, balanced on his shoulder. The carpetbag swung from his right hand as before.

Around him was the chaos of a city experiencing birth pangs in newly opened territory. The station swarmed with hawkers, dressed like their counterparts in Chicago and New York, eager to sell their wares. One of them, a small man with a prominent gold tooth, shoved an advertising pamphlet in front of Hec's face. Hec shook his head and continued pushing his way through the crowd. Here and there among the overalled farmers and cowhands who had come to meet the train stood a few fashionably attired women, quiet and elegant, unruffled by the clamor that surrounded them.

Along the street, horses shied not only from the train that had roared into the town, but also from automobiles. The oil haze the vehicles exuded blended with the steam from the puffing engine. Most of them were touring cars, their tops up as protection against the brassy sun. Their drivers honked their horns and waved to friends and relatives who were descending from the train.

A porter thrust himself through the jam of people and tried to take Hec's trunk from his shoulder. Hec drew aside, shaking his head. Without losing a step, the porter bounded away to take a pigskin grip

from the hand of a woman. Within a moment, the two were lost in the crowd.

Drawn up in front of the station were eight or ten stagecoaches. Hec's eyes moved quickly from one to the other. Some of the drivers had hung out bright banners advertising destinations; others waved broad-brimmed hats or derbies to attract attention and draw fares for the many outlying communities. Still others did the urging with hoarse shouts. One of these yelled to Hec, "Goin' to Belltown, ride with me. Guarantee to get you there in one piece, mostly."

"Wrong town, friend," Hec called back. The driver immediately turned to shout at another passenger, trying to persuade him to accept his services.

At last Hec came to a coach with a black-lettered oilcloth sign tied to the boot. "New Prospect," the sign proclaimed.

"That's me," Hec grunted and headed toward it, an imposing figure in the throng around the station.

"New Prospect?" he asked the grizzled driver as he approached the coach.

"That's what the sign says," the man replied, gesturing with a veined brown hand at the bold lettering. A little too proudly, Hec thought.

"I don't always believe everything I read," Hec smiled. "Just wanted to make sure."

"I'll load you on," the driver said. "Charlie!" he called to his teen-aged assistant. "Take this fellas bag. I'll handle his trunk."

"Handle it myself, if you don't mind," Hec said, letting Charlie take his carpetbag and toss it into the boot with the other baggage.

The woman who had surrendered her hand grip to the porter now emerged from the crowd. Hec had not paid much attention to her before, his eyes having been busy trying to sort out the many faces in the throng. The memory of Dobbs was still fresh in his mind. But so far no one seemed about to challenge his entry into Perry.

The porter tossed the woman's grip and a large parcel into the boot. With her was a boy Hec judged to be about seven.

"Mother, will we get there before dark?" the boy was saying.

"I have no idea, Andy," she said. Her eyes were large and dark gray. They were reddened from dust, reflecting the weariness of what had probably been a long and tiring journey.

Suddenly aware that Hec was staring at her, the woman blushed, gathered her skirts, and hastily entered the coach. "Come along, Andy," she said, and the boy eagerly scrambled aboard.

Hec carefully wedged the brass-bound trunk into a corner of the

ceage, which was the roof of the coach. "Now you can lash it down," he said to the assistant.

"Whatever you got in that trunk sure seems almighty precious." The driver tried to make a joke of it. He seemed to regard Hec as something of an eccentric for refusing help with his trunk.

Only when the baggage was covered with a tarp and tied down did Hec enter the stage. Besides the woman and her son, there was only one other passenger, a bull-shouldered, middle-aged man. Because of his expensive Western-style clothing, Hec judged him to be a wealthy cattleman. His bulky frame took up most of one seat. The woman and her son sat facing him.

"Why don't we let the lady ride facing forward, mister," Hec suggested. "Much more pleasant for her."

The man started to snarl something, then took a look at Hec hovering in the coach door. "Reckon you're right," he said quickly. He changed seats.

"You don't have to go to all that trouble for me," the woman protested.

"Since when in the history of the world has it been trouble to help a pretty woman?" Hec smiled.

She seemed embarrassed as she smoothed her blue dress and stared out the coach window. By now the driver was backing his team, trying to get into the mainstream of the traffic. The freighters, riders, buggies, and the nerve-wracking chug-chug of automobiles created an almost deafening commotion, the car horns adding a shrill honking sound to the racket.

Although it was turn of the century, the old frontier custom of not revealing names held between the two men. The woman finally eased the stiff silence by introducing herself as Nora Muldoon.

"Hec Ramsey," Hec said, and the cattleman frowned as if trying to place him.

"Name of Ben Ritt," the bulky passenger grunted.

From the way Ritt stared, Hec knew the man was waiting for him to say something further. But Hec was not in a talkative mood. Too many problems lay ahead of him. As he watched the rolling country flash past the coach window he thought of the contrast between it and the lively city they had left behind. It was as though they had abruptly stepped back into the nineties, when this had been Indian country. Hec turned in his seat to stare ahead. He smiled to himself as he noticed that from time to time the driver's young assistant dipped into a paper bag filled with small stones that he held between his feet on the floorboards. Whenever the team began to slow its pace a bit, the

assistant flipped a few stones at the rumps of the running animals—not with force enough to sting, but only as a reminder to keep moving.

“I used to do that when I was a kid,” Hec said, turning back to the other passengers. Nora Muldoon was looking at him. Quickly she turned away. He explained about the boy and the bag of stones.

Some time later, the coach suddenly rocked, and there was a screech of brake shoes on steel-rimmed wheels. A whinny broke from one of the horses as the team was brought to a sudden standstill. Hec jerked around in his seat, just in time to see the paper sack of stones slide from the floorboards, strike the road, and burst open. Directly ahead was the reason for the abrupt halt.

Four riders wearing bandannas over their faces, revolvers in hand, blocked the road. One of the bandits, his narrow-brimmed hat jammed low, seized the bit-rein of the off horse to hold the team in.

Nora Muldoon turned white. “What is it?” she whispered. “What’s happening?”

“Holdup,” Ben Ritt said in a low voice. “Just take it easy.”

As the other passengers turned to stare apprehensively out the windows, Hec snapped a sheaf of greenbacks from his coat pocket and quickly selected a ten-dollar bill. He tore the bill part way down the middle, then returned it with the rest of the money to his pocket. His movements were so swift that none of the others were aware of what he had done.

By now two of the outlaws were flanking the coach. The one on the boarding side leaned over in the saddle, brandishing a revolver.

“Outside, folks.” Although his voice was muffled by the bandanna, Hec’s practiced ear placed the man in his mid-twenties. The outlaw gestured with his gun once again. “When you folks step out, lemme see your hands all the while. You understand?”

“We understand,” Ben Ritt said. He stepped from the coach, helped Nora Muldoon and the boy to alight. She was ashen-faced. She hugged the boy to her side, staring fearfully up at the masked and armed men who loomed above in their saddles.

The obvious leader, the one who had spoken first, ordered the third outlaw to dismount and search Ritt and Hec. The man swung down. He wore boots that Hec recognized as having been made by the Sanchez brothers of Laredo. They bore the Sanchez mark an S, near the heel. It was an item that might be useful in future identification.

Keeping his rugged features impassive, Hec raised his hands when the outlaw nudged his spine with a gun barrel. Hec felt his short-barreled Colt being taken from its holster. He swore under his breath.

Not having the weapon left him vulnerable. He would have made a move to recover it, but this was no time for a reckless play that might endanger the lives of the woman and boy

Ben Ritt, it turned out, was not carrying a weapon. Hec's gun was tossed to the leader, who had remained in the saddle.

This man said, "All right, folks. Pockets inside out for you men. Same for your purse, lady." When she started to protest, Hec gave a warning shake of his head.

"Do what he says, ma'am."

"And throw down all your jewelry, understand? All of it! Don't make us look for what you're holdin' back. 'Cause we ain't gentle."

While Hec and the others started to comply, the outlaw on the far side climbed to the boot. He began to search for valuables in the baggage.

"Anything up there?" the leader called to him.

"No mail. No cash box!" he called down.

"Told you about these station runs." The leader sounded disgusted. "Go ahead an' check their goods!" he ordered. The man began freeing the tarp.

"Don't look like much up here," he called, after a minute or two.

When he had sent the tarp sailing to the ground, being careful not to frighten the horses, the leader took a closer look at Hec's snub-nosed Colt. He turned the weapon over and over in his hand, staring at it curiously.

"Why'd you go make a toy out of a good Colt?" he demanded.

Hec shrugged. "Easier to carry. And gets the job done short. Use a rifle for long"

Nora Muldoon suddenly cried out, "No!"

Hec turned, careful not to move abruptly and cause one of them to shoot. He saw that a bandit, heavier through the shoulders than the others, was holding the woman by one wrist.

"What's goin' on?" the leader demanded.

"She's got a ring she won't let loose of. Looks like real stones."

"Please, please, it's my wedding ring!" the woman cried.

"Your husband'll get you another one," the leader said through his bandanna mask. He gave a tight laugh.

"My husband's dead!"

"That so? Then you don't need no weddin' ring, do ya?"

Hec dipped his head in the woman's direction. "Give it to him, ma'am. He'll take it anyway."

For an instant Hec thought she might resist. He had to admire her

spunk, but a foolish move would only complicate their situation. He saw her glance down at the boy, whom she had pulled tighter against her side, as if to protect him from the outlaws. The boy stared in awe up at the man on horseback. Nora Muldoon took a deep breath and removed the ring. But instead of handing it to the outlaw, she let it fall to the ground at his feet. The stocky outlaw snatched it up.

The bandit who was prowling through baggage on top of the coach didn't seem to be having much success. "Nothin' up here but clothes and junk," he called down. "Can't get this fancy trunk open."

The leader looked at his victims. "Whose trunk?"

"Mine," Hec replied in an even tone.

"Toss him the key."

Hec hesitated, then said, "Nothin' in there important to anybody but me."

"I'll be the judge of that!" the leader shouted. "Give him the key!"

"No," Hec said coldly. Suddenly, every eye was focused on him. A heavy silence was clamped over the scene on the lonely road. The tableau held, the coach team fidgeting, the driver and assistant peering white-faced down from the seat. The four outlaws stiffened their shoulders ominously. Ben Ritt, in his expensive clothes, was sweating at the hairline. Nora Muldoon, her lips pale, hugged her son tighter.

The leader shoved Hec's gun into his belt. He cocked his own revolver and pointed it at Hec's head.

"Reckon you didn't hear me. I want the key to your trunk!"

"I heard you. No key!"

"You wanna be dead instead?"

Hec held the outlaw's eyes. "You can't just kill me," he pointed out coldly, "and leave the rest for witnesses. Means killin' the woman and the boy too."

Nora Muldoon gasped, her gray eyes flashing more hatred at Hec than at the surly outlaw who sat in his saddle with his gun leveled.

"How *could* you even *suggest* such a thing," she cried.

Hec's eyes remained fixed on the outlaw. "That kind of doing'll fetch a big reward for the killer," he continued in chilling tones. "You'll have your own men here to worry about later."

The outlaw, obviously giving Hec's grim warning some consideration, looked at each of his masked companions in turn. Then he straightened in the saddle.

"I don't figure to argue, mister ..."

It was all he could get out, because the stocky outlaw suddenly said,

“The hell with it, Jim. Ain’t worth it for a pig in a poke.”

The outlaw who had tried unsuccessfully to pry open Hec’s trunk seemed equally nervous.

“Anyways,” he said, glancing over his shoulder, “we hold back this stage too long, town folks might come lookin’ for it.”

Jim, the leader, gave a sour laugh and lowered his gun. “Ah, go on, git your horses,” he said in a tone meant to indicate that the decision to abandon the project was solely his.

As if eager to get away, the other three quickly gathered up their loot and put it in a gunny sack.

Jim began studying Hec’s Colt again. “Nice piece, all right. Kinda special. Fella named Hec Ramsey carries one like it, I hear. He’s comin’ to New Prospect ...” his voice was wary.

“Why don’t you keep the gun?” Hec said mildly, noting the surprise in Jim’s eyes. “Sure, go ahead,” he urged. “Then I’ll describe it to the town marshal so he can look for it. And look for you at the same time.”

“You act smart, but you ain’t.” Jim muttered. Then he tossed the gun some distance away into the cushioning road dust. He gave Hec a final warning. “You just let it lay till we’re gone from sight, y’hear?”

Hec nodded. “Because of the widow and her son, yes.”

Jim gave him a final stabbing look, filled with anger and frustration. Then the four outlaws kicked their horses into a run and disappeared around a shoulder of rocky hills, the hoofbeats fading rapidly.

The stage driver sighed with relief, then said quickly, “Get in, get in! Let’s get outa here!”

Hec helped the boy into the coach, then turned to assist his mother. But she drew away, as if loathing him.

“Whatever’s in that trunk, I hope it’s important enough to risk a child’s life for!” she said scornfully.

“No ma’am, but they weren’t aimin’ to kill today.”

“And how would you know that?”

“I’ve got a sixth sense.”

She glared at him and climbed into the coach, followed by Ben Ritt.

Hec, in the meantime, had walked down the road to where Jim had thrown his gun. With his left hand he took a handkerchief out of his pocket. Then, bending down, he hooked his right index finger through the trigger guard of the weapon. Only when he had carefully wrapped the gun in the handkerchief and placed it in an inside pocket of his coat did he come back and board the coach.

Ben Ritt, who had watched the entire operation, seemed genuinely puzzled. “Now just what was that about?” he asked.

“Just a new way of doin’ things.” Hec barely managed to reach his seat as the coach lurched into motion.

Chapter Two

It was late afternoon when Hec got his first glimpse of their destination. It was one of those sprawling towns of the Cherokee Strip that had not taken root to grow in a normal manner from frontier village to city, but had burst into existence virtually overnight, thanks to an act of Congress that had opened Indian territory to homesteaders.

Hec leaned forward to study the town through the ever-present pall of dust. There were no automobiles, as there had been in Perry; traffic here was horse-and mule-drawn. Plank walks clattered under wooden awnings, although in one block Hec saw workmen replacing a boardwalk with brick.

Even above the rattle and creak of the coach and the rumble of the team's hoofbeats, Hec could hear sounds of construction everywhere; hammers pounding, the rasp of saws on unseasoned lumber. In a business block workmen were hoisting carbon-arc street lights into place. On a building still under construction was a sign advertising power and gas. Next door was a merchant's tent. A city of tents was gradually being turned into one of more permanence, of frame and brick.

Everywhere, it seemed, were high-wheeled wagons, most of them drawn by mules. In the open backs of many wagons, goods were being hawked by men with loud singsong voices. Women bargained for gingham, which a crude, hand-lettered sign advertised at fifty cents a yard. Another sign advertised twenty pounds of sugar for one dollar. A wagon yard offered second-growth hickory buggies for sixty-five to ninety dollars.

As they roared into town, Hec could see from the muddied streets that it had recently rained here. The people on the crowded walks tried to avoid being splattered by the many wagons and saddlers. It seemed strange to Hec that on a street that had so recently been part of that vast wild territory known as a sanctuary for outlaws there were now men and women dressed in the latest Chicago fashions.

As the coach swayed and skidded on its way down the slick street, the driver yelled, "Holdup! Holdup!" and continued to shout his explanation for his wild entry into town all the way to the centrally located New Prospect Hotel.

Men began to run after the coach, caught up in the excitement.

"Civilization," Hec muttered dryly, "doesn't seem to have quite

reached the Cherokee Strip after all.”

Oliver Stamp sat in his office at the jail, feet on a large table that he used as a desk. He was reading a copy of the *New Prospect Journal* when he heard the commotion. Frowning, he went to the barred window overlooking the street. The office was located in a wood-slatted structure, more substantial than most of the other buildings in town. A plaque above the door informed the public that the building housed the DEPT. OF POLICE. Beneath that was a smaller sign: O. B. STAMP, CHIEF.

Through the barred window he saw the coach bear down on the building, the usual crowd of excitement-seekers in its wake. It didn't take much to stir up the populace, he reflected dourly.

Two of his officers hurried out of the building to the stage, which had finally stopped. The team was lathered. Ned Harker, the driver, waved his hands and shouted something Stamp couldn't make out.

Stamp started away from the window, and then decided to wait a minute and observe his two officers in action. The first was Arne Tornquist, twenty-eight, blond and husky in his navy-blue uniform. The uniform consisted of high-crowned peaked cap and a long, brass-buttoned tunic, unbuttoned at the top to permit access to the gunbelt. Pinned on the tunic was a semicircular badge featuring a star atop a wreath. The boots were sturdy and highly polished. With Arne was Davey Watson, a slender, quick-moving man, also in uniform, who had just turned twenty.

Oliver Stamp took pride in his job and in his men. He had trained them well and they showed it. At this moment, they were listening intently to the stage coach driver.

Stamp sensed that it was time for his official appearance. By now the driver should have run out of breath trying to relate his story to the two officers. When Stamp got around to questioning him the answers would be a little less shout and vagueness and would possibly make more sense.

Stamp picked up his hat. Unlike his men, he did not wear a uniform. He wore a plain dark suit, with his chief's badge pinned on the breast pocket. His hat was a black, curl-brimmed derby. His normally humorless expression did not encourage any smiles. Now, as he watched a ruggedly built man in a gray suit step from the coach, he looked as if he had tasted something sour.

Without being told, he knew the man was Hector Ramsey. Stamp had half a notion to turn back into his office and let the eardrums of Tornquist and Watson continue to take the assault of Ned Harker's strident voice.

But he had already been seen, and he knew it was too late for retreat.

Bad enough that the day had produced what appeared to be a stage holdup. Making everything even blacker for Oliver Stamp was the fact that Hec Ramsey had chosen this day to arrive in town.

Chapter Three

Hec Ramsey climbed to the boot and got his trunk and carpetbag. As he swung down, he saw the man in the doorway frowning at him. He knew from the badge pinned to the dark coat that it was O. B. Stamp.

Hec waited for Stamp to speak, a half-smile on his lips.

Instead of greeting Hec, the chief walked stiffly to the cluster of people gathered around the stagecoach driver, who was still shouting details of his encounter with holdup men.

“... and then they made all of us ...” He broke off as he saw Stamp approaching. “Sheriff, four fellas jumped us comin’ out of ...”

Stamp interrupted coldly. “I’m not a sheriff. Even you should know that by now, Harker. Stop making a speech and give my officers some descriptions they can use.” He turned to the onlookers. “The rest of you move along now. You can read what happened in the *Journal*.”

Muttering, the crowd started to disperse. Hec decided it was time to make his presence known.

He lowered the trunk and the bag. “I figure you to be Police Chief Stamp,” he said.

Stamp took a deep breath and nodded, measuring him with dark eyes that reflected little enthusiasm in what they observed. Hec had a feeling that the chief’s stern mien was compensation for lack of age and experience. Hec had heard that Stamp was only twenty-nine.

As Stamp continued to look him over, Hec put out his hand. “Hec Ramsey,” he said. As if you didn’t know, you cold-faced lump of stone.

“So I figured when I saw you get off the stage.” Almost reluctantly, Stamp offered his hand and gave Hec’s a perfunctory shake. Then, looking around to make sure no one could overhear him, he leaned close and said coldly, “The Town Council must’ve told you that you weren’t *my* choice for deputy chief.”

“Well!” Hec’s smile quickly faded. “No, the Council didn’t tell me.” He weighed Stamp with his eyes, then said, “But I’m glad *you* did.”

“Didn’t want you hearing it from someone else first.” He nodded at Hec’s baggage. “Soon as you’re settled, come see me at the station house.”

“Be settled in an hour or so,” he said, picking up his trunk and bag.

“Uh, Ramsey?”

“Yeah?”

“From what I can make out, this stagecoach holdup business sounds

a little amateurish.”

“Does seem that way,” Hec said dryly.

“Well, then that being the case, it does seem that a veteran U.S. marshal like you used to be could have handled it better.”

Hec felt his face redden. “Old fashioned and amateurish maybe. But they used real guns, mister ...”

“The men call me Chief. Or sir.”

Hec’s smile was cold. “Okay, Chief or sir. It was my opinion at the time that I’d be risking more than I was protecting.”

“How so?”

Hec handed him a slip of paper. “Here’s a list of what they stole.”

Stamp seemed surprised. He studied the list, obviously impressed despite himself. “Quite complete,” he muttered.

“You can also pass word to merchants, bartenders, and the like that if anybody tries to spend a ten-dollar bill torn down the middle, he’ll be one of the holdup men.” Hec hoisted the trunk to his shoulder, picked up the carpetbag, and said thinly, “ ’Scuse me, *sir*.”

Stamp scowled at Hec’s broad back, at the trunk balanced on his shoulder.

Arne Tornquist had overheard part of the exchange. “So that’s the famous Hec Ramsey.”

“The man’s a puzzle.”

“He is, Chief?”

“I’ve got an image of the man and yet ...” He turned to scowl again at Ramsey, who was just entering the New Prospect Hotel down the block. Then he beckoned to his two officers, “Davey, Arne. I want words with you boys.”

Stamp had not kept his voice down, and even above the clamor of the town, Ramsey had heard every word. What kind of an image am I supposed to have? he wondered angrily. Oliver B. Stamp had about as much warmth as a rattlesnake on a December morning.

Settled in his hotel room, Hec looked around at his living quarters. It wasn’t the best he’d had, nor was it the worst. The room was furnished with a canopied bed, a table and straight-backed chairs, an overstuffed sofa, and a mirrored dresser, atop which sat a pitcher and water basin. Blue and yellow forget-me-nots peppered the wallpaper.

Hec removed his jacket, and carefully took the gun, still wrapped in the handkerchief, out of the inner pocket. Gently, he laid it on a doily that partially covered the table.

Crossing the room, he stared at the fresh gouges on his trunk where Dobbs’s bullets had crashed and ricocheted off the brass bindings.

How close death had been at that moment.

Then, with a characteristic shrug at danger, Hec unlocked the trunk.

"Now we get down to business," he said aloud, rubbing his hands together ...

At the same time, in the station house, Oliver Stamp was being confronted by three middle-aged men. One of them, Ron Wingate, was saying sternly, "... but handling the scum in this territory ain't like runnin' a schoolhouse. You *need* a hard-nosed fast gun like Hec Ramsey."

"Shouldn't I be the one to decide that?" Oliver was red in the face. "After all, I'm the one the town elected chief of police."

Bart Harley said, "They also elected us to the Council—to decide what's best around here."

It was Will Drew who said, "Nobody's buckin' you, Oliver."

"Seems that they are," Stamp said stiffly.

"We're trying to help," Drew continued in the same level tone. "Hec Ramsey rode for Judge Parker's court and knows every mother's son of a horse thief this side of the Missouri."

"You mean he's a licensed killer," Stamp said, giving the three councilmen a sour look.

"That's bull and you know it," Wingate, the town jeweler, said angrily. "Territorial marshals don't get paid for bringing in dead men."

Harley gave Stamp a stern glance. "And just who are you to talk about Ramsey's credentials?"

"What's credentials got to do with it?" Stamp said.

"Just this," Harley continued. "He was a veteran police officer when you were teaching in the First School District in Illinois. The only reason you got elected here was because the man running against you couldn't read or write."

Stamp bristled. "Look, Harley, I don't like you, and you don't like me. Let's leave it at that!"

"We weren't elected to like each other, Stamp," Wingate put in. "The Council's made up its mind. And I tell you this—you don't try to work with Hec Ramsey, we won't throw away another penny on your fancy new Police Department!"

Stamp cleared his throat and said quietly, "You live in this city. It's your Department, too, gentlemen."

"That's exactly what we're trying to tell you." Harley leaned forward. "Understand?"

Stamp started to speak, but after looking from one middle-aged face to another, he knew it was no use to argue. They were united in their purpose. He wanted to say that Hec Ramsey just might stub his toe. Then would the Council be so eager to back him? But he remained silent. Let them find out for themselves when the time came. Then Stamp would do his damndest to refrain from saying, "I told you so."

Chapter Four

A wooden building in the center of town, a combination store and dwelling, bore a whitewashed sign on a glass window: BATHS AND BARBERING—50 CENTS EACH—AMOS C. COOGAN, M.D.

To Hec, refreshed after a night's sleep but still feeling grubby from the long, hot, dusty journey of the previous day, the sign was a welcome sight. Rubbing a hand over his stubble of dark beard, he entered the building. A bell tinkled over the door. He was greeted by a wiry little man in a white apron, standing in a curtained doorway that must have led to his living quarters.

"I'm Amos Coogan, here to serve my fellow man," he said in a squeaky voice. "What can I do for you, friend?"

"Barbering or doctoring," Hec laughed, his eye on a framed Harvard diploma on the wall, dated 1868. "For the present all I want is to get rid of a beard that itches. But first, I'll have a bath."

Thirty minutes later he returned to the front of the building, where Coogan was stropping a razor.

"Just set yourself down." Coogan waved a slim hand at a barber chair. He poured hot water from a kettle into a cup and began to whip up a thick lather.

Hec lowered himself into the chair, looking around at the unlikely layout. It was the strangest barbershop he had ever seen. The walls were lined with glass cabinets containing medical equipment. Some of it was fairly modern, probably from 1893 or later. Near a wooden replica of the human skeleton, bracketed by various surgical diagrams, was a fancy, hand-lettered copy of the Lord's Prayer.

"You been here long?" Hec asked.

"When I heard they were going to open up the Cherokee Strip, I came up from Lawton. Put all my goods in a wagon drawn by two fine hosses." He began to spread warm lather over Hec's jaw, talking as he applied the soap. "Yes sir, noontime, September sixteen, eighteen and ninety-three, I whooped those hosses and made for this here town."

"Then you were one of the first."

Coogan snorted. "Got here only to find that a couple of dozen sooners had staked out the best lots. But I picked me one anyway. Was going to be a kinda house-office-hospital, you know? 'Cept it turned out to be right in the middle of what is now Main Street. And my claim was voted out from under me."

“Couldn’t you pick another?”

“Two, three miles out of town maybe. Shoot, who wants a doctor you can’t reach with a holler?”

“I suppose. But if you’re a proper doctor, how’d you come to barbering?”

“Same as I came to eatin’, mister. Cause I had to.”

“Eating is a fine habit. I have it.” Hec smiled through the lather.

“Folks in this country are so rotten *healthy* it’s scandalous. And even when they’re not healthy, they’d rather spend their money on seed or whiskey than pay to be *told* they’re not.”

“That’s human nature—Ouch!” Hec winced as the razor nicked his chin.

“Tough patch of whiskers there,” Coogan said. “It’s a lucky thing I’m a good doctor, ’cause I sure ain’t much of a barber.”

“Then my life is more or less in your hands. Easy with that razor, huh?”

The bell above the door tinkled and Hec stiffened in the barber chair. Slanting his gaze toward the door, he saw that Oliver Stamp had entered. The Chief of Police seemed tense as he gave Hec a perfunctory nod.

“Doc,” said Stamp, “could you ride out with me to the Vandemeer homestead?”

“Sure.” Coogan continued to shave Hec.

Stamp looked exasperated. “Doc, I mean right now. A saddle tramp just rode in. Said Dutch and his wife are both laying there dead.”

“Dead?” Coogan gasped. “The both of them?”

“Way it’s told, Dutch killed Helen, then himself.”

“My God. That’s hard to believe. Why would he do that?”

“We don’t know,” Stamp said. “We don’t even know that’s the way it is yet. Are you comin’?” Stamp started for the door.

“Sure I’m comin’.” Coogan began untying his apron.

Hec sat up in the chair and wiped the traces of lather from his face. “Mind if I come along?” he asked Stamp.

“We’re not gunning for anybody,” Stamp said shortly.

Hec stood up and stared down at him. Finally meeting Hec’s eyes, Stamp said, “You have a horse, Ramsey?”

“Not yet.”

“Go down to the livery stable. Tell Christy to issue you one. Charge it to the Department.”

“I can afford to buy.”

“Police officers get issued horses and weapons,” Stamp said stiffly. “That’s regulations.”

Hec threw aside the towel and said, “Yes sir.” As he got his hat and coat and headed for the door, he noticed Coogan’s reflection in one of the glass cases. The barber-doctor was trying hard to suppress a smile behind Stamp’s back.

Stamp must have sensed it, for he spun around. Coogan was now grinning broadly as he shrugged into a coat.

“Just what do you find so funny, Doc?” Stamp demanded.

“You keep on trying to spank a fella like that,” Coogan grinned, “you could end up my best patient.”

Hec heard this as he stepped out into the bright day. The remark helped diminish some of the antagonism he felt toward Stamp. Pompous bastard, he thought as he dodged around the tail of a freight wagon and headed for a rambling structure marked LIVERY BARN down the block.

Within a matter of minutes he was in a stall alongside a five-year-old chestnut mare. Hec studied the animal while the blacksmith, Christy Morgan, a big man with soot-sweated arms, stood nearby watching him.

Hec turned from the animal. “She’s chesty enough, but a little straight in the pasterns for long hauling. Probably tire quick.”

“Well, I dunno about that,” Christy shrugged, and lumbered after Hec to an adjoining stall.

In this stall was a black gelding. Hec’s eyes suddenly gleamed. The animal began to fidget in its stall, and Hec stroked its neck. “Easy, now. Easy,” he said in a soothing voice. He untied the horse and led it from the stall. In the better light outside he studied the animal closely for a minute, then handed the lead rope to the blacksmith. “Walk him, will ya?”

“Sure.”

As the blacksmith walked the gelding away, Hec noted the animal’s movements. When the horse was led toward him, Hec squatted for a better view. Satisfied, he nodded and rose to his feet.

“He’s straight and clean, all right.” Hec took the lead rope and checked the eyes and nostrils. “Think we oughta join up, big fella?” he asked, stroking the horse’s muzzle.

The horse nickered.

At that moment Stamp rode into the stable and crossed to where Hec stood beside the black horse. “That the one you picked?” Stamp asked.

“He’ll do fine.” Hec turned to the blacksmith. “Saddle him up, will

you, Christy?"

When Christy led the animal away, Oliver Stamp removed a long-barreled Colt from his belt and handed it to Hec. "Here's your weapon."

Hec examined the Colt, then saw Stamp take a receipt book and pencil from his pocket. Stamp shoved the book at Hec and said, a little officiously, "Sign for the gun. And the horse."

Hec squinted up at him. "I'll sign for the horse, but I'd rather use my own gun," he said.

Stamp was impatient. "All police personnel carry issued weapons."

"O.K., guess I can *carry* it, if you want," Hec said, signing Stamp's receipt book and dropping the Colt into a saddlebag. "Like I said, don't mind carryin' it. 'Long as I can *use* my own."

Christy gave a snort of laughter. But when Stamp turned to glare, the blacksmith's broad and sooty face was impassive. Clenching his teeth, Stamp whirled back to face Hec, as if expecting to be met with a derisive grin. But Hec was adjusting the straps of the saddlebag.

"You ready in there?" Doc Coogan called from the stable door.

"Ready," Stamp grunted, still glaring at Hec. He rode for the door, his horse stamping bits of straw on the stable floor. Coogan was seated on a flat-bed wagon, holding the reins of a team of bays. Arne Tornquist shared the seat with him.

Stamp turned his head as Hec rode out to the street. "Let's go," he snapped. "You ride up with me, Ramsey."

"Yes sir."

Hec swung his black horse up beside Stamp's dun; Coogan and Tornquist lumbered along in the wagon behind them. Ahead of them a cow broke from cover, ambled across the road to be followed by a calf. A few clouds were banked against the horizon.

After another quarter-mile or so Stamp said, "You don't rile easy, Ramsey."

"Practice keepin' calm."

"One day you might get mad enough to show the face I expected to see. The face of the man the Town Council forced down my throat."

"You figure if you keep stickin' splinters under my hide that I'll get fed up and leave?"

Stamp did not reply. He continued riding, stiff-shouldered, staring straight ahead at the flat country. A hawk swooped from a cottonwood, caught an air current, and rose out of sight on outstretched wings.

Hec waited for Stamp to speak. Although he hadn't really been able

to evaluate Stamp yet, he had dealt with enough people in his time, good and bad, to sense that there was turmoil raging within the man who rode at his side. He seemed too opinionated, displaying, at least so far, more regard for regulations than for actual police work.

Stamp cleared his throat. Here it comes, Hec thought.

“How long did you ride for the ‘Hanging Judge?’ ”

“Rode for Judge Parker from ’90 to ’96, when they retired his court.”

“His kind of justice always sounded more like vengeance to me. Not law and order.”

“You weren’t there ... sir.”

“There are some things in life to be thankful for,” Stamp said, his voice tinged with anger. “That’s one of them.”

They did not speak again until Coogan, still behind them, shouted, “There’s the Vandemeer place ahead!”

Hec saw before him a weathered one-room structure on a slight rise of ground. A windmill in a state of disrepair clanked near the small house. Hec tilted his hat brim against the sun and took a long look at what was obviously marginal land, the soil so poor that it would yield only a grudging crop of what appeared to be wheat.

Coogan shared Hec’s sympathy for anyone who would try to wrest a living from such a place. “God knows scrapin’ whiskers instead of practicin’ medicine is bad enough. But tryin’ to scratch a harvest from land like this makes me sick to think about.”

Stamp dismounted. “Let’s go inside and have a look,” he said brusquely. He led the way to the door, which hung eerily open. Hec came up and stood beside him, his eyes taking stock of the scene inside.

It was not pretty. If the planted land beyond the house had been a mark of poverty, the interior of the house was even more proof that the Vandemeers had had an unusually unlucky life in the Cherokee Strip. The room was small, the few pieces of furniture obviously hand hewn. The window curtains, though clean, were limp and torn, mended here and there with black thread.

Hec gazed at the dead man, sprawled on his back before the rock fireplace. He was clad in rough work clothes, one knee of the trousers patched with a striped material, a smear of dried blood crusted his temple and graying hair. A Colt .45 lay on the open palm of his outstretched right hand. Hec took particular note of this, then turned to look at Vandemeer’s wife. A faded young woman, she lay face down a few feet away from her husband. There was blood at her neck and back.

“Jesus,” Arne Tornquist breathed as he stared at the bodies. “I never seen worse than this.”

Stamp jerked his head at Coogan. “Doc, take a look.”

Coogan moved to the woman and knelt down. “A shame, damn shame,” he said sadly.

Tornquist bent down beside Vandemeer’s body and reached for the gun that lay in the palm of the man’s right hand.

“Arne!” Hec said sharply. “Whyn’t we leave that until Doc’s through having his look?”

Tornquist jerked his hand back from the gun and looked at Stamp for confirmation of the order.

Stamp grudgingly accepted Hec’s advice. “Go see if there’s anything around outside, Arne.”

“Yeah,” the officer said and stepped out the door.

“Woman was shot in the back of the head,” Coogan said, looking up. “Died that instant.” He got to his feet and went to the body of the man.

Hec watched him for a moment, then turned to Stamp. “You know these people?”

Stamp nodded. “*Knew*. Past tense. Yes, I knew them.”

“Vandemeer the kind of man to kill his wife and then himself?”

“They were honest and hard-working,” Stamp said. “Sort of religious, as I recall. But there’s things between man and wife nobody knows except them.”

Despite his medical experience, Coogan’s face reflected sadness. “I do know they wanted a child bad enough. Came to see me two times about it.”

“That so?” Hec said narrowly.

Coogan stood up, shaking his head. “It’s a shame,” he said, absently brushing off his trousers. “No denying how it looks. One shot into her head, the next into his own.”

“Looks that way to me too,” Stamp said.

Hec gestured at Coogan. “One thing, Doc. Was her hair burned in back?”

“What?” the doctor asked, surprised Hec walked to the woman, squatted on his heels, then bent forward to sniff.

“Wasn’t,” Hec said.

A look of aggravation crossed Stamp’s face. “What’re you talkin’ about, Ramsey?”

Hec, still squatting beside the woman’s body, looked around at the Chief of Police. “If she was shot this close,” he pointed out, “the blast

would've powder-burned her hair. And left a smell of cordite. There's neither one."

Stamp frowned and exchanged a glance with Coogan. The doctor returned to the body of the woman. He studied her for a minute, then nodded his head.

"Ramsey's right," he confirmed.

"Turn her over," Hec said.

Stamp's face reddened. "Are you tryin' to make this murder?" he demanded.

"Only if it was, Chief!"

Their eyes met for a moment, then Coogan did as Hec had suggested. The woman's simple gingham dress, buttoned down the front, was badly soiled. Hec's practiced eye noted that one button was missing below her bodice. And he noticed something else as well. "This floor ain't as dirty as she is," he said.

Coogan looked surprised, then grim. He seemed caught up now by Hec's suggestions and began to examine the body more thoroughly.

"He's right, you know, Oliver," Coogan mused as he continued his examination. "Helen Vandemeer was always clean and neat as a pin."

"Maybe so," Stamp conceded, "but ..."

"Here, look!" Coogan interrupted. "Fingernails on both hands just *full* of dirt."

Stamp looked down at the woman, his skepticism and irritation at Hec's interference quickly fading. "By God, you're right, Doc."

"Looks like she'd dug in the ground with her fingernails."

"Well, maybe she did," Stamp said, "before it happened."

"Maybe," Hec put in. "I started wonderin' because of him, actually." He gestured at Vandemeer's body.

"How do you mean that?" Coogan asked, frowning.

"Doc, can a man shoot himself in the brain," Hec asked calmly, "then open up the hand that pulled the trigger?"

Coogan pondered for a moment then said, "Could happen. Maybe when he fell."

"What's more likely?"

"More likely his hand would have locked on that gun like a claw. And him being dead this long, rigor mortis would've made it take a crowbar to pry that gun loose."

Stamp obviously didn't like it. But he couldn't avoid the obvious. "You sure about that, Doc? Yes, of course you are," answering his own question.

Arne Tornquist entered the house, jiggling an object in his fist.

"Nothin' outside," he announced. Stamp nodded at Tornquist's fist. "What've you got there, Arne?"

"Found a button is all."

"A button?" Hec asked. He crossed the room. "Can I have a look, Arne?"

"Sure." Tornquist opened his fist. In his palm lay a small green button. Hec took it with him across the room and again knelt beside the woman. Guessing what Hec had in mind, stamp and Coogan moved in closer to have a look. If they needed any confirmation, it was there before their eyes. Hec was holding the button at its original place on the dress, just below the bodice. It matched the other buttons exactly.

Hec stood up. "She was killed outside and brought in here."

Coogan still seemed unwilling to accept Vandemeer's innocence in the crime. "He still could've done it," he insisted.

"No, Doc," Stamp was forced to admit. "If he was going to kill himself, why should he bother?"

Tornquist's young face showed surprise. "You callin' it murder, Chief? Who'd wanna kill Dutch and his wife?"

"I don't know," Stamp said darkly. "Maybe we ought to find out *why* first."

Hec turned his attention from the bodies on the floor to the condition of the room. He peered behind a broken-down sofa and lifted several pots from their hooks beside the fireplace. "I guess they didn't have anything worth stealing," he said at last.

"They *owed* money," said Coogan grimly. "And they were ashamed of it."

Hec crossed the room to a shelf that held several pieces of brightly painted Indian pottery. He examined one closely, then said, "Osage, isn't it?"

Stamp nodded. "Closest neighbors they had was the reservation."

"They were good people, Ramsey," Coogan said. "Once fetched me clear out here to fix the leg of an Indian kid who'd fallen off his horse on their property."

Hec returned the piece of pottery to the shelf. "Doc, can you cut those bullets out of them?"

"Don't see where it matters, but sure I can."

"I mean *cut* them out, not dig them out."

The doctor looked puzzled. "Don't see what you're drivin' at, Ramsey."

"Don't want the bullets scratched while you're doing it, Doc. That's

what I mean.”

Stamp looked skeptical. “Just what do you have in mind now?” he demanded as Hec crossed back to the dead man. With a twig he had picked out of the fireplace, he lifted up the gun.

“There’s a new way of telling if a certain bullet came from a certain gun,” Hec told the Chief. “All right if I hold on to this weapon?”

“Suit yourself.” Stamp turned to Tornquist. “Arne, let’s load them into the wagon.”

“Sure, Chief.”

The four men began the grim chore, Tornquist and the doctor handling the woman, Hec and Stamp taking the man. They carried the bodies out and placed them side by side on the wagon. Coogan covered them both with a worn blanket he brought from the house.

Stamp stood beside the wagon, studying Hec. Hec knew that although the Chief was annoyed at the way he had taken over, he had enough common sense not to object to his new crime-detection methods, something not seen before on the frontier.

They started back for town, Stamp hunched in the saddle, the wagon creaking along behind them.

“Hell of a thing, this killing,” Stamp said at last.

“Killings always are,” Hec replied, squinting into the sun.

“From what I hear, you’ve had plenty of experience.”

Hec Ramsey did not reply to the Chief’s jibe. What was the use?

Chapter Five

Later that day, Stamp introduced Hec to the men under him. Through the barred windows of Stamp's office Hec could see traffic moving along the street. He glimpsed Nora Muldoon on the opposite walk, her reddish hair pinned up under a brown hat. He crossed to the window for a better look, but she had disappeared in the throng that surged along the walk.

"I want you to have a look at my men," Stamp was saying. He had one haunch on the edge of an oaken table. "Ramsey, can I have your attention?"

Hec turned from the window. "Sure."

Stamp continued. "I want to let you know what I have in mind about this department."

"I'm listening," Hec said. He stood with hands clasped behind his back.

"I believe in organization," Stamp said, "and I believe in discipline. I *don't* believe in having a one-man show." Hec knew the Chief was referring to him. He decided to keep his mouth shut.

Stamp slid off the edge of the desk as four police officers, including Arne Tornquist and Davey Watson, filed into the room to stand at attention against a dark paneled wall. Stamp introduced the two Hec had not seen before as Sergeant Juan Mendoza and Lew Terris. "Glad to know you, men," Hec called across the room.

Mendoza, a husky, dark-complexioned man, was about thirty-five. Terris, a bearded man with guarded eyes, was younger, in his late twenties or early thirties. Somehow the navy-blue police uniform seemed out of place on him. He would be more likely to wear a brush-popper's garb, Hec decided, staring at him. Terris avoided his gaze.

In his official voice, Stamp was saying, "Beside street patrol, Davey here is assigned to cover and investigate any type of arson."

Hec smiled at Watson. "Haven't been at this very long, have you, Davey?"

"No sir," he admitted with a faint laugh. "Whole *town* ain't been at anythin' very long."

"Lew Terris here," Stamp continued, "had three years with the cavalry, and another two years riding shotgun on the Pawnee-to-Stillwater stage."

Hec moved up to shake Terris' hand, searching the eyes. Terris

muttered, "Howdy, Ramsey," and quickly looked away.

Hec continued to look at him as Stamp said, "Lew's special assignment is burglary, safecracking, any kind of robbery."

Hec gave Terris a cold smile. "You ever ride for bounty?"

"Not without a badge," Terris blurted. Then, catching a look from Stamp, he added, "Sir."

"Our sergeant here has had experience." Stamp nodded at Juan Mendoza.

"Experience helps in police work," Hec said.

"Juan worked under Charlie Colrod when they first started the Oklahoma City Police Department. Was there till he came here."

"Then you must've been there when the Casey gang killed Chief Jones," Hec said.

Mendoza nodded his dark head. "Seen it happen and rode after 'em, Ramsey."

"Milt Jones was a good friend of mine."

"Best there was," Mendoza agreed.

Stamp said, "Sergeant Mendoza's on top of murders, assaults, all crimes of violence." Then Stamp seemed to remember something. "By the way, Sergeant, Deputy Chief Ramsey will supervise the Vandemeer case personally." As Hec showed his surprise, the Chief added, "That is, if it turns out to *be* a case."

"Yes sir," said Mendoza.

"Now let's see if we can find some use for the rest of the day." Stamp waved his men out of the room, but asked Hec to remain.

Stamp resumed his seat on the edge of the table. "Well, that's most of it, Ramsey. We keep two men on street patrol every day, one man all night. They take turns."

Hec nodded and stole a glance at the window, hoping he might spot Nora Muldoon again. He didn't. Stamp was talking.

"Of course, Ramsey, if you've got any suggestions, recommendations, I'm perfectly willing to ..."

"That Lew Terris."

Stamp bristled. "What about him?"

"You check on the background he gave you?"

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"I've seen him before," Hec said thoughtfully. "Maybe without those whiskers. And it wasn't in the cavalry or riding shotgun on any stagecoach."

"Well, it couldn't have been a gunfight or he wouldn't be here, would he?"

Hec's jaw tightened. "Why the hell is your back up all the time? Is that the way you are? Or is it me?"

"It's you, Ramsey." Stamp's voice was cold. "It's what you represent!"

"And what's that?"

"Law out of the barrel of a gun!" Stamp's voice was explosive.

"Explain!"

"You think a man's done wrong, you just face up to him and start shooting. Winner's right and loser's wrong."

Hec gave him a dry smile. "You know something? I'd get a little madder than I am if you didn't used to be right."

"*Used* to be?"

Hec nodded. "Yeah, I did those things you said. And more than once. Had to. The difference between us is that you think I wanted it that way."

"I think you still do!"

"Then you've got a real problem ... *sir*."

Stamp started to speak, but Hec swung out of the room, slamming the high double doors behind him.

Chapter Six

The energy Last Run showed during the daytime hours was intensified at nightfall: building continued under the flare of kerosene lamps, freighters of lumber were unloaded, mules ate baled hay spread out in the street, people jostled each other on the walks. When a mason swore at some pedestrians who had invaded his newly laid brick walk before the mortar had set, a drunk started to pry loose one of the bricks to hurl at the mason. The mason, enraged, retreated to a doorway.

Hec, wearing his badge, loomed up in the crowd. "Enough of that, friend," he warned the drunk.

The man took one look at Hec, swallowed, muttered a "yes sir," and fled into the darkness. Hec had to smile. Even as I say "sir" to O. B. Stamp, he thought.

As he moved along the crowded walks, he was stopped every so often by someone who wanted to shake his hand. Hec couldn't tell whether they were impressed by his badge, or, as Stamp had implied, they only wanted to shake the hand of a fast gun.

Well, maybe ...

He pushed through the swinging doors of a saloon. The noisy crowd inside fell silent the moment he entered, and all eyes in the smoky lamplight turned in his direction. A dance-hall girl smoothed her hair and tried a tentative smile, but Hec only nodded and proceeded to the bar. He wanted to see if Lew Terris might be among the patrons. He had heard that Terris frequented saloons in his off-duty hours—which was no crime, Hec had to admit. Still, he was curious about the officer, and he wanted to observe his habits when out of uniform.

A bald bartender sang out through a break in the crowd gathered at the bar, "How about a drink, Ramsey? Step right up. Anything you want is on the house. Just name it."

"Another time, maybe," Hec said, waving him away.

"I knowed you back East, remember?"

Hec couldn't recall ever having laid eyes on the man. "Of course I remember," he said, and the bartender puffed out his chest.

Hec stepped back out into the night. The street lights sputtered and collected swarms of insects. He planned to spend the rest of the evening getting to know the people who were most active at night.

By mid-evening, news of the killings out at the Vandemeer place

had circulated through the town. People were beginning to ask questions, trying to find out what had *really* happened out there. Hec was noncommittal, shrugging off all questions.

Suddenly spotting Nora Muldoon up the street, he hurried away from the crowd beginning to gather around him. She stood on the walk, sleeves rolled up, supervising the placing of a sign above a shop window. The sign read MULDOON'S PHARMACY.

Hec started to walk toward her. She shot a glance his way, then turned back to the two men hanging the sign. Hec paused for an instant, then touched the brim of his hat and proceeded on up the street. Had he turned around to look at her, he would have seen that she was staring at him, her teeth sunk into a full lower lip. She seemed vexed.

Hec drifted back to the people milling about the street and began mingling with them, striking up casual conversations here and there. Every so often, he would throw in an off-handed question about the Vandemeers—how often had they come to town, had they ever quarreled in public, that sort of thing. He was so nonchalant about it that most of the people he talked to had no idea he was doing anything more than just trying to be friendly.

But O. B. Stamp, when he heard about it, realized that Hec was being more than neighborly. In his leisurely stroll around town that evening, he was gathering important information about the Vandemeers, their friends, any problems that could possibly pertain to their tragic deaths.

After breakfast the next morning, Hec visited a land office. The agent, Earl Enright, about thirty-five, was scratching figures onto a sheet of paper when Hec walked in and stood in front of the counter that bisected the room. Hec introduced himself and stated his business in a casual voice.

Enright seemed eager to help. "You mean if it was suicide *or* murder you look for a reason? A motive?"

"Anything you can tell me will be appreciated," Hec said.

Enright thought about it. Behind him were rows of standing files. The walls were covered with shelves holding ledgers. One set of shelves held nothing but government bulletins. A notary public's seal hung above Enright's desk.

"They had to fight off a few claims, sayin' they were sooners," Enright explained. "But for that matter, who didn't?"

"Tell me something, Enright."

"Yes?"

"Is the Vandemeer land worth anything?"

Enright shrugged. "I'm no farmer. But you seen for yourself how they lived out there."

"What happens now? To their homestead, I mean."

"Usual thing. Legal search for next of kin, though reckon everybody knows there ain't any."

"You sure, Enright?"

Enright picked at a broken fingernail. "Helen was an orphan. Dutch lost all of his family in Europe before he came here. He told me that himself." Enright seemed unhappy. "Land'll go for taxes, I s'pose."

"How do you mean 'go'?" Hec asked.

"Like usual. Public auction end of next tax quarter."

Hec thought for a moment, then said, "You have the names of the people who wanted the land before the Vandemeers got it?"

"Wanta take a look?" Enright invited him to step behind the counter and to a card file. "I do recollect one fella interested."

"Tell me," Hec urged.

"Ben Ritt." Enright gave a rueful smile. "Matter of fact, I think ol' Ben claimed the whole territory."

"Ambitious."

"Then he settled for what was left over from other claims, You know Ben?"

"We came in on the stage together. Horse rancher?"

"Runs the best stock north of Texas." Enright thumbed through the file, pulled out the card he'd been looking for, and looked it over briefly. "Yeah, Ben Ritt was one all right. I just wanted to make sure."

"Who else, Enright?"

"Emanuel Keating." Enright pulled out another card. "But Keating moved on to Jasper. Uh—there was Polly Birdwell, but she just bought to sell. Moved on after the first boom."

"Anybody else besides Ritt who's still around?"

Enright, searching through the file, said, "Dr. C. McIntyre ... Albert Myers ... Roy Winnock ... and Ritt." Enright looked up. "All the others gone off somewhere else. Like I said, that land isn't much of a prize."

"The Vandemeers liked it."

"Yeah, I reckon they did," Enright admitted. "But they must've been daft to want to own such a piece of property."

"I wouldn't consider Ritt daft. And you claim *he* wanted it," Hec pointed out.

An hour later Hec, carrying his footlocker, entered the police building. Oliver Stamp looked up from his desk. He nodded at the trunk. "You moving out?"

Hec's smile was tight. "You hope?"

Stamp retreated with a shrug. "You find out anything about the Vandemeer business?"

"Only one who ever wanted anything from them was Ben Ritt."

Stamp snorted. "Ritt? His pocket silver could've bought everything Dutch Vandemeer owned."

"Don't know. Vandemeer's land was his pride." When Stamp started to redden at being contradicted, Hec said quickly, "Oh, I don't think Ritt wanted it bad enough to kill him." Hec paused. "Have to ask him though, don't you think?"

The door opened and Lew Terris, looking sleepy and irritable, crossed to the desk. He started to speak, but Stamp gestured him to silence.

"Weren't you on street patrol last night?" Stamp demanded.

"Yes sir." He gave Hec a nod. "Deputy Chief Ramsey here sent a kid to wake me up."

Stamp turned to look at Hec, but Hec's attention was focused on Terris. Even when he turned to speak to the Chief, he kept one eye on Terris.

"Thought I'd have a chance to tell you before he showed. But now I know where I remembered him from."

Terris stiffened, a guarded look in his eyes. He gave a nervous tug at his beard.

"It's Lew *Farrel*," said Hec, "not Terris at all, is it?"

"If you mean me, my name's the one I told you."

Hec gave him a hard smile. "The name of your whiskers maybe. Not the one you were born with. Roll up your left sleeve."

"What for?"

"Lew Farrel has a tattoo on his left forearm. Naked lady and a snake."

Stamp cut in with an angry protest. "He doesn't have to roll up his sleeve ..." He was stopped by the look in Hec's eyes. "How'd you know about the tattoo?"

"Lew Farrel was arrested and convicted three times in '94 and '95 for peddling whiskey to Indians. Mose Burris brought him in that last time."

"That damned fool was lookin' to make a reputation."

"Mose Burris was a U.S. deputy marshal," Hec said.

"Frank Dalton was also a U.S. deputy marshal," Stamp reminded, "before he turned to robbing banks." Stamp turned on Terris. "But that's no excuse for you lying to me. Put your gun and badge on the

desk.”

Terris took an abrupt backward step, his face tight. His right hand moved imperceptibly toward his gun. Suddenly he froze, looking beyond the Chief to Hec. The grim set of Hec’s features made Terris go a little pale.

Stamp, not realizing what Terris was about to do, or choosing to ignore it, said angrily, “What’re you waitin’ for? Didn’t you hear the order I gave?” He broke off, suddenly understanding that gunplay was imminent. “Now wait a minute!” he warned Terris. “You threat’ning to throw down on me?”

“No, not a lot he ain’t,” Hec said.

Terris glowered, taking another backward step. Hec’s voice was deceptively mild. “You heard the Chief. You take out your gun with two easy fingers, and just lay it on the table.”

Terris braced himself and seemed about to risk taking on Hec. But under Hec’s cold stare he lost even more color.

Stamp resented being indulged in the situation, and he showed it. His eyes were angry as he started to swing toward Hec, who stood to his right.

“Didn’t I tell you I didn’t want any Wild West show around ...”

“Don’t get between us!” Hec snapped, and Stamp stopped short. “All right,” Hec said to Terris. “Do what I told you!”

Terris began to sweat. He rubbed his right hand along the seam of his pants. Hec was poised, waiting. Suddenly, Terris lost what little nerve remained. He lifted the gun with two fingers and placed it on the table. Then he unpinning his badge and slid it across the polished surface. It made a small, metallic sound as it came to rest against the weapon.

“Back away, Terris,” Hec ordered.

Terris did as he was told.

Stamp turned on Hec. “All right, Ramsey, that’s enough.” Then his gaze stabbed Terris. “And you! You’re under arrest for threatening an officer.”

“Sir?” Hec drawled.

“Now what?”

“He’s not worth arresting,” Hec pointed out, “if it means telling folks here in town that a tinhorn thief was part of their police department.”

“We’d also be telling them we’re not afraid to clean our own house,” Stamp retorted.

“Yeah, but you don’t want the rest of your men wondered about,

maybe laughed at, do you?" While Stamp was mulling this over, Hec added, "Let him ride outa here. And the hell with him."

In the instant it took for Hec to turn his head slightly toward Stamp, Terris took a sudden backward step toward the table. But Hec's eyes flashed back to him. Terris pulled up on the balls of his feet and nervously licked his lips. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead.

Stamp absently brushed a hand over the badge pinned to his coat. "Okay, Terris, go on. Git!" He jerked a thumb at the door.

Terris started to speak, then changed his mind. After giving Hec one final savage glance, he strode from the room. The door crashed as he swung it shut. For a moment or so Hec could hear the angry thump of his boots on the walk outside. Then all was quiet.

Only then did Hec flex the tension out of his shoulders and arms. Stamp watched him narrowly. "All right, what'd you prove?" the Chief demanded. "That my authority was no match for your gun?"

Hec had never seen Stamp so upset. "Wasn't trying to prove anything," he calmly replied. "But as long as we're on the subject, remember this. It still takes *both* in this part of the country. It does if you want to keep the peace *and* your hide."

Hec saw the irritation on Stamp's face. But the Chief had enough common sense to know when he was on the losing side of an argument.

"How come you remembered Farrel today, and not yesterday when you met him?" he demanded suddenly.

"I got to know him better this morning," Hec said mildly.

"What'd you mean by that?" He watched Hec step across the room to where he had placed his trunk. Hec unlocked it and lifted the lid.

Stamp's curiosity brought him over. As he peered into the trunk he gave a whistle of surprise. The upper shelf of the trunk was made up of small compartments that contained bottles of chemicals, swabs, brushes. There were gelatin papers, powders, and a magnifying glass. Hec identified each item as Stamp watched in fascination.

Hec gave a wry grin. "What'd you *think* I had in here?"

"I figured it was some kind of tool box," Stamp said in an awed tone. "Instead of tools, it's a whole private crime laboratory in a suitcase. Well, I'll be damned."

Hec withdrew a card from a small filing case in the trunk and showed it to Stamp. The card, labeled "Lew Farrel," contained a small photograph of a clean-shaven Terris/Farrel. Beneath the picture were a few lines pertaining to the man's criminal record.

"Seems our man wasn't exactly idle before he came here," Stamp said ruefully.

With a grease pencil, Hec sketched in a beard across Farrel's cheeks. There was no doubt now that Farrel and Terris were one and the same.

"How'd you ever get this idea anyway?" Stamp asked, nodding at the card case. "I never saw anything like it."

"Just a few ideas of my own. Some I borrowed. I figured that with my own file of outlaws—some with photographs, some just with descriptions—it'd make hunting them down a lot easier."

"I see." Stamp rubbed his chin.

"I put the file together over the years I rode the territory out of Fort Smith," Hec explained, once more rummaging in the trunk. "It's a combination of my own experience and what I borrowed from other lawmen."

Hec removed two matchboxes from the trunk. One was labeled "Dutch Vandemeer" and the other "Helen Vandemeer." After placing these on the oak table, he removed a gun, tagged "Vandemeer," from the trunk.

"This is the weapon we found in Vandemeer's hand," Hec explained.

"Looks like the one," Stamp admitted.

"Was going to test it this morning, but I wanted to get that Farrel business out of the way first."

"Farrel. Yes." Stamp reddened slightly at the reminder that he had hired a criminal for his own police force. He watched Hec roll a small empty gunpowder barrel into the room. With it Hec brought a wicker basket full of what looked like rags and cotton. Hec proceeded to fill the barrel with the contents of the wicker basket.

"I wish I knew what you're doing," Stamp said.

Hec pointed to the Vandemeer gun. "Going to shoot a bullet out of that and don't want to lose a neighbor doin' it." Hec gave him a tight grin.

He pointed the gun toward the rag-filled barrel and squeezed the trigger. The roar of the gunshot filled the room. There was a sound of running feet, and the door was flung open.

Arne Tornquist, gun drawn, was in the doorway. "Chief, anything wrong?" he cried.

Stamp waved him away. "An experiment. Leave us alone, Arne."

The officer seemed mystified by the barrel in the center of the room. Gunsmoke curled through a bar of sunlight filtering in through a window. Tornquist went out and closed the door.

Hec searched through the rag-filled barrel and found the bullet. When it had cooled sufficiently, he carried it to his trunk and took out a small balance scale. After setting this on the table, he removed the

bullet from the box labeled “Dutch Vandemeer.” While Stamp bent close to catch every detail, Hec placed the Vandemeer bullet and the one he had just fired on the counterbalanced dishes. They balanced perfectly.

Stamp frowned. “What does that prove?”

“Both weigh two hundred forty-five grains. Means they’re the same caliber.”

“I don’t see ...”

There was a brief uproar as one of the officers brought in a shouting drunk. But Stamp was engrossed in Hec’s mysterious actions to pay the scene any attention. The sounds diminished as the drunk was taken into the jail section of the building.

Hec had removed the bullet from the “Helen Vandemeer” box and put it on the scale in place of the one that had killed her husband. The scales tipped heavily in favor of the test bullet that Hec had fired into the barrel.

Stamp drew a deep breath as he stared hard at the imbalanced scale. “There’s sure a difference.”

Hec nodded. “The bullet that killed the woman came from a lighter gun.”

“Then it *was* murder,” Stamp said grimly.

A stillness settled over the room. In the street outside, wagons rumbled and passers-by chattered. But here two men were faced with the possibility of murder.

Hec wasn’t completely satisfied yet. “Let’s double check.”

“How do we double check?” Stamp wanted to know. Despite his antagonism toward Hec, he was now caught up in something new in police work, something he did not quite comprehend.

From the tmnk Hec removed a microscope and set it up on the table. He carefully placed the two bullets on the viewing plate. Peering into the microscope, Hec said, “O.K. here’s the bullet that killed Dutch Vandemeer and the one I just fired. Have a look yourself.”

He stepped aside so Stamp could look into the glass. “Both bullets look the same to me.”

“They are.” Hec then placed the bullet taken from the body of Helen Vandemeer on the plate. He had his look, then drew back, his jaw set. He gestured at the microscope.

Stamp knew from Hec’s manner that something vital was about to be revealed. He looked into the tube and immediately a startled oath burst from his lips.

“I can’t believe it!” he exclaimed.

Hec took another look to make sure. The third bullet was noticeably different beside the other two. Its striations did not match those of the first pair. "Somebody killed the woman," Hec said heavily, "then killed Vandemeer with his own gun. Trying to make it out to be murder-suicide."

"But who could have done it?" Stamp asked, his face pale.

"Don't know who or why. Not yet. But at least we know *what* happened."

Suddenly Stamp realized that he had let his awe and enthusiasm get the better of him. Still unwilling to give Hec a full share of credit for his innovations, he once more adopted his earlier coolness. "That's pretty good," he said, waving a hand at the microscope. "Pretty good. When'd you start bothering with things like this, anyhow?"

Hec was repacking his equipment. "Happened over the years," he explained. "Five, six years ago, a New York newspaper wrote about a Frenchman, name of Bertillon, who was identifying people by the size and shape of their ears."

"Never heard of such a thing," Stamp said.

"Yeah, sounds funny, but it works. A couple of years after that, Scotland Yard in London, England, figured out that a man's fingerprints were strictly his own. No other man's were the same."

"Scotland Yard figured this out?"

"Then somebody else, I don't know who, did the same thing with bullets. It's called 'ballistics.' All based on same idea—*there's no two things in this world exactly alike*. Not even your own two front teeth, if you look close enough."

Stamp regarded him narrowly. "Now you want to find the gun that killed Helen Vandemeer. The one that fired the bullet Doc took out of the woman."

"Goin' over to see Ben Ritt this afternoon," Hec said.

"Now wait a minute, Ramsey. Ritt was out of town when it happened. He was on the stage with you."

"He didn't have to *do* it to *know* about it."

Stamp thought about it. "Yeah, I see what you mean."

Chapter Seven

That afternoon, Hec rode his gelding through the rolling foothills. A warming sun touched the side of his face. He liked this country, with its lush grasses, the sparkle of an occasional stream meandering through tall cottonwoods.

When he came to a pair of wranglers moving a herd of horses, he pulled up to ask directions.

“Lookin’ for Ben Ritt,” Hec said.

One of the riders, a long-jawed man, swung his horse over to where Hec was. “You’re on Ritt’s land right now,” the man grinned. “Hell, you ride anywheres west of town you’re on his hoss ranch.” The man waved a hand toward open country. “You’ll find Ben Ritt yonderly.”

Hec thanked the man and rode on, thinking about the man he intended to question. He had learned that Ritt got his start in the horse-raising business when he brought three blooded stallions from Kentucky and mated them with the best local mares. Recently, Ritt had gone East and come back worried, some folks claimed. Automobiles was the reason. As more of them appeared on the streets, the price of horseflesh dropped.

As one man Hec questioned had put it, “Ben Ritt figures them automobiles is pointin’ the way to the future.”

But Ritt wasn’t the kind of man to quit on the future. Oil had been found over in Bartlesville four years ago, Hec had learned, and the first Tulsa well had been brought in just a few months ago. It was interesting to consider this information in connection with Ben Ritt.

At the crest of a hill, Hec drew rein and stared at an oil derrick and line shack in the flats below. A half-dozen men were working around the derrick base.

Hec touched spurs to his horse and started down the slope. As he neared the well and the sound of the drilling grew louder, he saw a tall blond man in his early twenties, wearing rigger’s garb, pick up a rifle.

“What you want?” the man demanded. When Hec introduced himself, he scowled and lowered the rifle. “So you’re workin’ with O. B. Stamp. I’m Steve Ritt.”

Hec swung down and shook young Ritt’s hand. He knew that Ben Ritt had set up his son, Steve, in a job with a geologist-engineer named Roy Fletcher, who had been hired away from an Eastern oil company. They had sunk wells several places in the area on Ben Ritt’s

land, but so far they'd come up with nothing but dry holes.

A man stepped from the line shack, holding a survey map in his hand. He was chunky and dark, also clad in rigger's garb.

"Any trouble, Steve?" he shouted above the din of clanking pipes.

Steve Ritt shook his head. He introduced Hec to the man, Roy Fletcher, the geologist. Fletcher's handshake was perfunctory. Hec surveyed the man, wondering how many of the dry holes were his fault. In town he had heard that Ben Ritt was not used to failure, that his temper was getting as short as his capital in this mad scramble for oil.

It was Ritt himself who waved the son and the geologist aside and came to shake Hec's hand. As the younger men returned to work, Ritt reminisced a moment about their experience in the stage holdup and asked if any progress had been made in tracking down the bandits. Hec told him one of the officers was working on it.

Hec then turned to the subject he'd come to discuss. He asked Ben Ritt about trying to buy the Vandemeer homestead.

Ritt seemed puzzled. "The Vandemeer place was no different than a dozen like it I tried to buy. It was just land."

"Buy? You mean 'claim,' don't you, Ritt?"

Ritt swallowed. "I mean both," he blurted with a trace of anger. "When I lost a claim judgment, I offered the owners a fair price for their holdings. Most of 'em took it." A wagon had just pulled in beside the derrick.

"But Vandemeer turned you down, right?" Hec asked.

"Yeah, and maybe they're sorry they did," Ritt said sourly.

"Tell me about them being sorry."

"They were sorry, that's all! Damn it, what's so important about the Vandemeer place all of a sudden?" Ritt shouted.

Steve Ritt suddenly broke away from the wagon that had just arrived. "Pa!" he yelled. "Dutch Vandemeer killed himself! Killed his wife!"

For one instant, Ben Ritt seemed stunned by the news his son had announced. But he recovered quickly. "How do you know so much, Steve?"

"Willie just come out from town with the news." Young Ritt waved a hand at the wagon driver near the derrick.

Ritt turned on Hec with sudden hostility. "You never said anything about the Vandemeers. How come you didn't?"

"Thought you knew about it," Hec drawled, watching Ritt closely.

"How the hell would I know?" He jerked his head at the derrick.

"I've had my head in this dirty hole ever since I got off the stage!"

"Most folks've heard by now."

"Most folks got nothin' better to do than talk." Ritt squared his shoulders and added in a milder tone, "Shame about Dutch. Why'd he do such a thing?"

"He didn't."

Ritt and his son exchanged surprised glances. Ben Ritt's jaw dropped when Hec added, "They were murdered."

Steve Ritt had not brought his rifle with him. Now he looked over his shoulder to where it rested against the wall of the line shack, as if he wished he could run and get it.

"Just cool off, Steve," Hec said.

"Cool off?" The sunburned face under the pale hair was an angry red. "What're you talkin' about—*murder!* They claim Dutch was found with his gun ..."

"They were murdered," Hec stated calmly. "There's evidence that they were." His gaze slid to the elder Ritt. "What we don't know yet is why."

"And you come out here lookin' for why?" Ben Ritt demanded.

"I'll be looking in a lot of places, Mr. Ritt. Fact is, the Vandemeers didn't have much more than their land. And you showed some interest in that at one time."

Ritt bristled. "Why, damn it all ..."

He was interrupted by Roy Fletcher's voice. "Steve! Mr. Ritt!"

Ritt and his son wheeled around and looked at the derrick. Fletcher was waving his arms, pointing at liquid that had begun to gush past the drill.

"We got it!" Ben Ritt cried. "We struck oil! And damn well about time!"

There was a rising roar, and then the well blew in. All of them took cover beside a rock outcropping at the base of the hill as liquid gushed straight up the derrick and fanned out in the wind. It splattered the men below.

Ben Ritt took a dab of the fallout that had struck his cheek and touched it to his lips. His round face turned bitter with disappointment. He turned to look at Fletcher, who spread his hands, confirming failure.

"Water and sandstone, Mr. Ritt," Fletcher said.

Steve Ritt placed a hand on his father's arm. "I'm sorry, Pa."

"But you said ..." Ritt's accusing eyes rested on Fletcher. "You both said ..."

“Roy and I thought the maps showed a good chance here, Pa,” Steve said quickly.

“We’re runnin’ out’ve chances, boy.”

“Mr. Ritt?” Hec said.

Ritt bared his teeth. “We’re through with our business, Ramsey. Whether you think so or not!”

“For now, sure.”

“For until I say different!” Ritt shouted. “You come trespassin’ on my land, I won’t be responsible for what happens, y’hear?” Ritt smeared more of the worthless fallout across his face. The liquid gushing from the well had diminished.

“I heard you, Ben Ritt,” Hec said in a level voice. As Ritt stood there fuming, Hec mounted his horse and rode away. His clothing, which had been splattered by the water that gushed from the derrick, was now drying. He thought about Ben Ritt, about the volatile young son, who had snatched up a rifle when a stranger approached. He wondered about Roy Fletcher, the geologist, who, for one reason or another, seemed unable to bring in a paying well for his employer.

Hec had reached the center of town and was about to ride over toward the police building when sudden movement caught his eye. Tinning in the saddle, he noticed Nora Muldoon flapping dust from a throw rug in the doorway of her pharmacy. Hec slowed down to watch her. The window of Muldoon’s Pharmacy was now filled with a display of drug and toilet articles.

She noticed him looking at her.

“Howdy, Mrs. Muldoon,” he called in a voice loud enough to be heard above the rumble of a buckboard passing along the street.

She gave him a curt nod and, tucking the rug under an arm, stepped back into the store. A high-spirited female, Hec thought, smiling to himself.

Hec’s mind was still absorbed with Nora Muldoon when a bearded old man suddenly appeared on the crowded walk and waved to him. “Ramsey!”

Hec swung his horse over to the edge of the walk and leaned down.

“Bartender over to Big Creek Saloon been lookin’ for you,” the man confided. “Important, he says.” Hec thanked him and immediately headed for the saloon.

Because it was still afternoon, the place was much less crowded than it had been when Hec first visited it. Several men were drinking at a large bar in the rear, and a few games were in progress at the deal tables against the far wall.

The bartender set out a glass when he saw Hec coming. Hec shook

his head. "Thanks, not now. What's on your mind?"

The bartender, a narrow-shouldered man with a sunken chest, wore a bushy handlebar mustache. He glanced nervously at a shadowed corner of the room, then reached into his apron pocket and pulled out a greenback, which he placed on the bar in front of Hec.

Hec's eyes brightened as he noted that it was a ten-dollar bill, partially torn down the middle. The bill that he had deliberately torn when the stage bandits had blocked the road.

"Who gave it to you?" he asked softly.

The bartender jerked his chin toward the wall where the deal tables were located. Hec turned slowly. A six-handed poker game was in progress.

"Name of Jim Fenner," the bartender whispered, indicating a tall, lean man in faded range clothes with a sweat-stained hat tipped back on his head. He was studying his cards.

"Jim," Hec mused, remembering that one of the bandits had called the leader by that name. "Just might be." Almost instinctively, Hec's hand moved to his holstered gun.

"Fella used the ten-dollar bill to pay for his drinks," the bartender said in a low voice.

Hec asked about the others in the game. The bartender knew only one, Judge Hiram Tate, a burly, middle-aged man wearing a bow tie and a homburg.

Hec watched Jim Fenner concentrate on his cards and absently reach for a half-empty glass beside his chips. He drained the glass.

"Okay, you go pick up his glass," Hec said to the bartender. "But hold it by the bottom, like this." Using only the tips of his fingers, and being careful not to touch more than the very bottom, picked up an empty glass someone had left on the bar. "See what I mean?"

The bartender gave him a quizzical look, but did as he asked. He crossed the room to Fenner's table and picked up Fenner's glass. Fenner, busy pushing chips into the pot, paid no attention.

When the bartender returned with the glass, Hec took it, holding it by its base. He strolled to the exit, trying not to attract attention.

Outside, he blinked his eyes against the lowering sun and saw Sergeant Mendoza on the opposite walk. Hec waved to get the officer's attention, and Mendoza crossed over, dodging a pair of cowboys running their horses past the legal speed limit for town. Mendoza's dark face showed disapproval, but he did not reprimand them. There were matters of more importance; his Deputy Chief was beckoning.

Hec described Fenner to Mendoza. "Keep an eye on him, will you, Juan?"

Then, still gingerly holding the glass, Hec hurried down the block to the police station. There was more to police work than using a gun, much more, and Chief O. B. Stamp was going to see some proof of that now.

Modern law enforcement, along with the automobile would be changing the West.

Chapter Eight

Within an hour, Hec was removing powdered prints from the glass taken from Jim Fenner's table and transferring them to a white card. Stamp was watching him, absorbed in what Hec was doing. Hec then compared the fresh prints with those on another card, labeled "Bandit Leader."

"You took fingerprints from your own gun," Stamp breathed.

"Yeah, after it had been handled by the leader. Prints match up, far as I can tell. But we'll make sure."

Hec used a magnifying glass to compare the two sets of prints. He grunted with satisfaction and handed the glass to Stamp. "Want a look?"

Stamp took the glass and studied the prints. "Can't make much out of it," he confessed.

"Look at those loops and whorls," Hec said. "Same on both sets of prints."

Stamp squinted to get a closer look. "By golly, the same!" He straightened up. "Let's get Fenner!" he said with determination.

Stamp had started for the door, but Hec reminded him of a point of law. "We'll need a warrant."

Stamp stopped. "Yes, you're right. I almost forgot."

"And we haven't caught Fenner in the act of *doing* anything, remember."

Stamp made a quick decision. "Okay, I'll get the warrant. You stand watch on him." He swung open the door and looked back. "You do *just* that, Ramsey. Don't force anything."

Hec didn't bother to tell him that he'd already instructed Mendoza to watch Fenner. With an impatient shrug, he hurried from the building.

When he entered the saloon for the second time, he saw Juan Mendoza leaning against the wall, arms folded. He was near an alley exit, where he could watch the card game without being observed.

Hec gave him a nod, positioned himself at the end of the bar. Some cowhands at the other end were drinking beer and laughing. Hec wondered if any of them were Fenner's companions. But there would be time enough to find that out later. Right now they had a big fish on their line. Or so Hec hoped.

Five minutes later, Stamp entered. He glanced toward the poker

table, where a mound of red and white chips were in the pot, then came to where Hec stood.

Hec saw the Chief's empty hands. He frowned. "Did you get it? The warrant."

"Couldn't. I need the judge."

"Where is he?" Hec asked, then remembered the bartender pointing out Judge Tate in the game.

"The judge we need is pitting his poker skills against those of our suspect," Stamp was saying.

At that moment, Judge Tate shot a suspicious glance across the table at his opponent, Fenner. Then, scowling, he looked at his own cards as if debating his next move.

Hec said, "Well, there's one way to play this game."

Before Stamp had a chance to ask what he meant, Hec crossed the room and moved in behind the player sitting between the Judge and Jim Fenner.

"Judge Tate?" Hec said in a mild voice.

Tate glanced up at him. "Eh? Wait a minute, wait a minute." He pushed two red chips into the already large pot. "All right, damn it," he said to Fenner. "Call you."

Fenner didn't hear him at first, because his attention had been distracted by Hec standing at his elbow. He swallowed nervously and asked the Judge to repeat his call.

Hec knew that Fenner had recognized him as one of the stagecoach passengers. But Fenner was able to cover his nervousness after the initial surprise. He laid down his cards.

"Aces full," he announced.

Tate slammed his own cards down in disgust. "Damn. I haven't had a thimblefull of luck all day."

"Judge," Hec said, "I'm Deputy Police Chief Ramsey. We need an arrest warrant."

As Fenner nervously raked in his chips, the Judge leaned back in his chair. "Warrant? All right. Who for?"

Hec leveled a finger at the judge's poker partner. "This fella here. Name's Jim Fenner, I understand."

Fenner froze in his chair, his eyes bright. Hec remembered those pale eyes above a bandanna mask. One of Fenner's cheeks was deeply scarred and there was a nick in his right ear as if he had been cut up in a knife fight. The other four players quickly left their seats, one of them knocking over a chair in his haste. An ominous quiet settled over the barroom.

Tate seemed annoyed. "Just what is this, Ramsey? I know Jim Fenner. Hate him 'cause he's lucky at cards, maybe, but for no other reason."

"We have evidence he held up the stagecoach I was on."

Judge Tate started to splutter indignantly, but his words were lost in the confusion as Fenner leaped to his feet. His right hand streaked for a gun at his belt. Hec, anticipating the move, swung an uppercut against Fenner's jaw. Fenner crashed into the table, upsetting it. Chips clattered to the floor as he fell amid the wreckage. His gun skated under one of the fallen chairs. Hec picked it up and stuck it into his belt.

But Fenner wasn't out of it yet. Shouting obscenities, he came to his knees, scrambled through the wreckage of the table and snatched a gun from the holster of a rigid spectator. Before he could turn, Hec backhanded him across the face. Fenner went down again, losing his hold on the gun. As he reached out for it in desperation, Hec pressed down with his boot, pinning Fenner's right wrist against the floor. A yelp of pain broke from Fenner's lips.

Hec bent down, twisted the gun free, and handed it back to the man Fenner had grabbed it from.

Mendoza had come pounding up, his dark features showing rage. "So this is our *bandido*, eh?" he said, eyeing Fenner.

Stamp pushed his way through the onlookers. "Juan, lock him up!" he ordered, jerking a thumb at Fenner. Mendoza needed no second urging. He snapped a pair of manacles on Fenner's wrists and led him away.

Judge Tate appeared from under a nearby table, where he had taken refuge. He was mopping a florid face with a white linen handkerchief. As he brushed himself off, he looked at Hec with disapproval.

"Next time you come for a warrant, Ramsey," he wheezed, "I'd just as soon the suspect wasn't sittin' in my lap."

Hec gave him a tight smile. "Sorry, Your Honor. We'll need three more warrants."

"Who for this time?" Judge Tate grunted.

"For the men who were with Fenner."

"You know who *they* are?"

"No, but Fenner does."

"You seem mighty sure of yourself, Ramsey," Tate said.

"Pays to be sure," Hec replied modestly.

That evening, Hec put on his good suit, brushed his hair, looked at himself in the mirror, and tried to imagine what he would look like to

a pretty woman. Like hell maybe, he thought, and grinned at his reflection in the wavy glass on the wall.

Minutes later, he reached Muldoon's Pharmacy, where a kerosene lamp burned beside the door. He stepped over to the adjoining building, still only half-completed, that served as living quarters for Nora Muldoon and her son.

"Who is it, please?" Nora called softly when Hec knocked.

"Hec Ramsey. I'd like a word with you."

At first he had the feeling that she wasn't going to open the door, but then he heard her footsteps and the sound of a bolt being withdrawn.

"Come in, Mr. Ramsey," she said stiffly.

He entered, hat in hand, and gave her a tentative smile. By lamplight she seemed even prettier.

"Don't know if you've heard," he said. "We caught one of the holdup men."

Her large eyes widened. "Oh? Have you recovered my things?"

"No, not yet." Hec twisted his hatbrim in large fingers. "That's part of what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Part?"

"Yes ma'am." He peered beyond her into a small kitchen. He could see her son sitting at a table, spoon in hand. Hec turned to the woman. "You, your son, and Mr. Ritt are eyewitnesses."

"I suppose we are," she said with a shrug.

"You can help us identify the man we got. And the rest of the gang."

"Fine, I'll be glad to. Is that all you wanted?"

"No. I also wanted to know how good you are at taking care of your son. And yourself."

She looked startled. "What did you say?"

"The three men we don't have in custody. They *also* know you'd be witnesses against them."

"My God, I never thought of that." This new thought seemed to shake her for a moment. She searched his face anxiously.

"Mind if I step into the kitchen?" he asked softly. "No use letting somebody maybe overhear us."

"Yes, yes of course."

He followed her to the kitchen with its dark walls of brown-painted lumber. Unpacked crates and boxes in a corner of the room testified to the Muldoons' recent arrival. Andy Muldoon recognized Hec and gave a quick smile.

"'Lo again, young fella." Hec rumbled the boy's hair. He was

finishing cake and milk. Evidently he and his mother had been taking their evening meal.

“Andy, you remember Deputy Chief Ramsey.”

As the boy looked surprised and at the same time impressed, Hec turned to her. “He wouldn’t know me by such a fancy title. How come you do?”

“Heard you mentioned in some talk, I guess,” she said hastily, flushing. She busied herself turning up the wick of a lamp in the center of the table. Obviously she had been curious about him, he decided, and had asked questions around town. To be found out seemed to embarrass her.

She waved a hand at a pot on the stove. “Could I offer you some stew? Not Mulligan, but Muldoon.” She smiled weakly at the attempted joke.

“Just some coffee’d be fine, thanks.” He sat down and she brought a coffeepot and cup to the table.

As she filled his cup, Hec asked the boy how he liked the town so far.

Andy bobbed his head affirmatively, then contradicted it with a shrug. He stared glumly at the table. “Well, takes time to meet folks,” Hec said, sensing the boy’s loneliness. “Lots of lads your age around.”

Andy’s gaze suddenly brightened. “I saw an Indian today.”

“That so? What kind?”

The boy looked puzzled. “I dunno, just an Indian.”

Nora Muldoon sat across from Hec with her own coffee, apparently interested in what he was saying.

“Well, that’s like sayin’ you saw a European,” Hec said. “I mean, just around here, for instance, there’s Osage, Pawnee, Cheyenne, Ponca.”

“There are?” The boy’s eyes widened.

“Maybe a dozen more. And all different.” Hec sipped his coffee; it was good and strong, the way he liked it. “Why, the difference between a Blackfoot and a Comanche’s like the difference of a Swede to an Italian, you know?”

Andy looked in surprise at his mother, as if seeking her explanation. She said, “I know they have different dress and customs, but ...”

Hec leaned across the table. “And different religions, histories, and languages.”

“I always just thought of them as ... well, people,” she said, meeting his eyes for an instant and lowering hers.

“A Sioux could no more understand an Apache than you could, Mrs.

Muldoon.” Hec’s voice took on a faint anger. “Just because our government’s lumped ’em all together doesn’t mean they’re all of a kind.”

“I see.” She seemed impressed. She said to her son, “Andy, go fix your bed. I’ll be in in a few minutes.”

Andy gulped the rest of his milk, then stood beside his chair. “Good night, sir.”

Hec smiled, stood up, and shook hands with the boy. “Nice seein’ you again, Andy.”

The boy grinned and hurried into a small bedroom off the kitchen. When Hec resumed his seat he found Nora with a bemused look on her face.

Aware of Hec’s eyes on her, she gave a faint laugh. “When you’re with them every day, you forget how fast they’re growing.”

“You’re lucky, no matter.”

“When I saw him standing there beside you ...” She broke off and said, “No children of your own?”

Hec shook his head. “Never seemed much point in marrying when I was ridin’ the territories ten months of every twelve.”

“I see ...”

“How long since you lost your husband?” Hec asked softly.

“Almost a year.” She toyed with her coffee cup and stared into the shadows. “He was a pharmacist. We had a fine shop in St. Louis until the lung sickness took him”

“I’m so sorry to hear that, Mrs. Muldoon.”

Her lips tightened. “And then the city politicians said I couldn’t carry on without a license, *which* they wouldn’t give me. After my working side by side with him for all those six years!” Her voice started to break, but she quickly regained control.

“Have you talked to Doc Coogan here?” Hec asked.

Nora put a handkerchief to her eyes for a moment, then nodded and smiled. “I talked with him today. Told me he knows the names of some things, but not what’s in them. Welcomed me in his impatient way.”

Hec could imagine the scene between the doctor-barber and this intelligent young woman.

She cleared her throat. “Tell me, Mr. Ramsey ...”

“Hec.”

“Hec? Is that a proper name?”

“A lot more proper than Hector.”

She nodded in agreement. “Well then, do you think my son and I

are in any real danger?"

"I don't know. I consider *that* dangerous enough."

He stood up, gesturing at the uncovered windows. "When are you goin' to get those windows curtained?"

She seemed surprised. "I hadn't thought it important."

"It is."

"I'll do it first thing in the morning."

"You trust all your door locks?"

"Yes, I checked that straightaway," she told him. "The medicines I had shipped here are valuable."

Hec faced her. "Do you have a gun?"

"No."

Hec took his gun from its holster and showed it to her. She recoiled, a hand to her throat.

"Do you know how to use one?" he asked.

"Lord, no."

He holstered the weapon. "Then you're better off without. Anybody follows you or tries to get in here, anything suspicious, you just yell your head off till help comes. Understand?"

She nodded. She seemed about to speak, but she quickly pressed her lips tightly together. There was a suspended moment between them when their eyes held in the lamplight. Then Hec picked up his hat.

"I'll be going now." She followed him to the door. He turned, noting how softly beautiful she was in the faint light from the kitchen.

He took a deep breath. "I think I want to say one more thing."

"What is that, Mr. Ramsey—Hec?"

"I sent a man out to warn Ben Ritt," he said, twisting his hat in his hands. "I could've sent a man here. But I wanted to come myself. You understand what I'm saying?"

"I think so. I'm glad you did."

Hec relaxed a little. "All right, then. Good night."

"Good night."

He stepped out into the darkness, turning once to see her in the doorway, a faint smile on her lips. Then she closed the door.

The following day dawned gray and overcast, and the air hung heavy over the group of mourners gathered in the cemetery. They had come to bury the Vandemeers, and now they stood facing the twin mounds of freshly turned earth, graves for husband and wife. Most of the important people in town were present, including Stamp and Doc

Coogan. A minister was speaking of a new and heavenly life for the Vandemeers, but Hec, standing near the graveyard's picket fence, could barely hear him. He was deliberately standing off from the crowd so he could study the faces of the mourners. He glanced from face to face, hoping that the murderer might have a morbid curiosity and risk attending the services. It had happened before.

Two riders coming up to the cemetery fence caught Hec's eye. One was an Osage warrior named Rides-with-the-Sun, who had been pointed out to Hec earlier in the day. The other was his fifteen-year-old son. They dismounted from blanketed ponies and walked proudly through the gate. The boy carried a small buckskin-wrapped package.

By now the minister had finished, and the mourners were beginning to disperse. Hec watched the two Indians. Their black hair was braided; they wore cotton shirts and Levis. Hec knew that they were members of the family the Vandemeers had befriended when the boy had been hurt on their homestead.

To Hec, the ceremony he was about to witness was more impressive than the one that had just been concluded. He knew the Indians had come to pay their final respects and to bring a symbolic present—a canoe to carry the dead safely to the next world.

As the grave site began to clear, the boy, Standing Bear, crossed to the graves. He knelt and unwrapped his bundle to reveal a hand-carved, wooden canoe. Gently he placed it between the two graves. While the boy continued to kneel, Hec walked over to talk to the father.

"Most of the townspeople figure it was murder and suicide," Hec said grimly. "What do you think?"

The Osage brave shook his head. "No, he was not a man who could do such a thing."

"But why should anyone kill them?"

"White men kill for the land," the brave grunted.

Hec pressed on, feeling he might learn something vital from this friend of the late homesteaders. "But why kill them? Their land was poor."

"For the whites, *owning* land is a richness in itself. He told me that a man came to buy his land."

"At the beginning. When all the whites came into the Cherokee Strip. Is that what you mean?"

The Indian turned to look at the two graves, his dark eyes burning. "It was during the summer harvest. A man came then."

Hec's interest sharpened. "That would be about six weeks ago. Do you know who it was?"

The Indian shook his head, the shiny, ink-black plaits swinging across his shoulders. "I was only told 'a man.' Vandemeer did not name him. And it did not matter." Hec's disappointment was obvious. The brave leaned close. "But under the last moon, there was a different man searching the Vandemeer land."

"Searching for what?" Hec asked softly.

"He did not see me. We did not talk. But he stamped his foot on the land, then touched the earth to his lips."

"I think I understand."

"Then he went to the stream and let the water run through his fingers. He touched the water to his lips."

"Was that man here today?"

"I did not see him."

"Will you show me the place where he tasted the earth and water?"

The Osage nodded, then looked at his son. The boy pressed the palms of both hands first on one Vandemeer grave and then the other. Then he arose and came to his father, a solemnity on his finely featured dark face that was truly spiritual.

The three of them rode out of town together. They were a strange trio—the rugged-looking ex-marshal, now deputy chief of police, the Indian brave, and his young son. People on the walks turned to stare and wonder.

After they crossed the greening plains, it did not take the Osage long to lead Hec to where a narrow rivulet cut through soft foothills. There the Indian drew rein and pointed to the ground.

"Here?" Hec asked, and the Indian nodded.

Hec squatted, scraped his fingers through the earth, then held a clod of dirt to his nose. He sniffed. It told him nothing. To him it smelled like what it was, dirt.

He moved to the stream. The two Indians remained on their horses, looking on impassively. Hec knelt by the stream and let the cool water flow through his fingers. He glanced back at the Osage, who nodded. Hec withdrew his hand. He frowned.

His hand was wet from the creek water. But it also showed a black, oily smear on the palm. His heartbeat quickened as he rubbed a thumb through the oily film.

He walked back to the Indians, his suspicions confirmed. "You've helped me a lot," he told the brave.

"They were my friends," the Indian said simply, and the pair rode away.

Chapter Nine

Sergeant Juan Mendoza grinned at his prisoner, who was cowering against the stone wall of a jail cell.

“I don’t want you to tell me anything, Fenner! Not for a while.”

Jim Fenner was sweating. “Listen, Mendoza ...”

“Take your time, Fenner. I like ‘questioning’ scum like you!”

Mendoza suddenly pinned him against the wall with his left arm. In his right hand he held an eighteen-inch-long varnished bat, a sawed-off nightstick. He gently prodded the end of it against one of Fenner’s kidneys.

“Ever feel one of these across your back, Fenner?” Mendoza bared his teeth. “Oh, you won’t like it, friend.”

Fenner winced as Mendoza prodded again. “Wait a minute!” he protested. “You got no right!”

“I got better. I got you!” Mendoza’s laughter was an unpleasant sound in the small cell. “Knew a fella had his kidneys cracked when he got hit with a stick like this. He screamed for a week every time he bent over.”

As Fenner trembled in the grip of the burly officer, the Chief suddenly appeared at the barred door of the cell. “Sergeant!” Stamp bellowed.

He jerked open the cell door as Fenner peered at him over one of Mendoza’s thick arms.

“Take your hands off him,” Stamp ordered.

“But I was trying to question ...” Mendoza looked at the Chief’s enraged face, then released Fenner. The prisoner gave a sob of relief and slumped to a cot.

Stamp leveled a forefinger at his sergeant. “What the hell do you think this is, some kind of zoo?”

“No sir. I was just ...”

“Never mind. Just get out of here!”

Mendoza hung his head and left the cell. Stamp locked the cell door, then followed him down the corridor. When they were out of sight of the cell, Mendoza lost his humbled look and waited for the Chief to reach him.

Stamp whispered, “You think it worked?”

“Don’t know who was more scared when you barged in there, him

or me.” Mendoza gave him a faint grin. “I think he’s ready for you.”

“Let’s see.”

Stamp went back to the cell. Fenner, slumped on the cot, regarded him apprehensively. Stamp went in, holding out a package of cigarettes. “I’ve got some of these new-fangled tailor mades. Try one.”

Fenner eagerly clutched at a cigarette. Stamp lit it for him. When Fenner had inhaled deeply, apparently relieved, Stamp smiled down at him.

“You don’t have to say anything you don’t want to, Fenner. Understand?”

Fenner stared suspiciously through a fog of cigarette smoke. “I don’t figure what you mean.”

Fenner’s eyes widened as Stamp withdrew a jeweled bracelet from his pocket. “Doesn’t matter anyway,” Stamp said casually. “One of your partners tried to sell this off this morning. We got a description of them.”

Fenner’s eyes locked on the bracket. “We never took that!” he exclaimed.

“Oh? You mean *you* never took it.”

Fenner stiffened on the cot, the cigarette dangling from his lower lip. “I never took it? What you mean by that?”

“All I know is that the lady who was on the stagecoach says it’s hers. Says one of your men took it from her handbag.”

Fenner leaped to his feet, his face contorted. “That cheatin’, no good sonofa—”

Stamp acted understanding. “Why don’t you sit down, Fenner.” He gestured at the cot. “Get it off your chest.”

Hec Ramsey rode up to the police building, dismounted, and left his horse at the tie rack. Sergeant Mendoza was behind his desk. Hec gave him a nod. At that moment, Stamp appeared from the jail, holding a bracelet in his hand. He gave Hec a barely perceptible nod, then handed the bracelet to Mendoza. “I know where they are now,” he said to the Sergeant.

“So Fenner talked.”

Stamp nodded. “Take the bracelet back to the jewelry shop,” he told Mendoza. “And tell Mr. Wingate thanks for the loan.” As Mendoza got up from his desk, Stamp added, “And on your way back, get Arne. Were going after Fenner’s friends.”

Mendoza nodded and went out the door.

Stamp turned to Hec, who stood with arms folded. “Fenner says his

cohorts are holed up in an abandoned mining shack at Weaver's Landing."

Hec said softly, "There's oil on the Vandemeer homestead."

Stamp's eyes widened. "You sure?"

Hec nodded. "Positive."

"Did the Vandemeers know it?"

"Doubt it. But somebody else sure did."

"Who?"

"Only one man I know around here looking for oil," Hec drawled.

"Ben Ritt," Stamp said thoughtfully. "First things first, Ramsey. We're going after the rest of the Fenner gang."

"You're the boss."

Stamp gave him a hard look. "Yes, I am."

As soon as Mendoza returned with Tornquist, the four men got their horses and rode out of town.

Their destination, Weaver's Landing, was not far away. Although all that was left of it now were a few abandoned, broken-down shacks, it had once been a busy mining town, filled with activity and excitement. When the land had first been opened up, all kinds of one-shot speculators had poured into the Cherokee Strip. Those who had come to find gold and silver had concentrated on this area. They thought all they had to do was pick it up off the ground. One storyteller even claimed he had found a diamond mine. He sold a few shares of stock before disappearing, like so many of his fellow swindlers.

As they neared the abandoned town, Hec and the other three cut into the trees and began to follow a rock-bound creek that emptied into the lake. Ahead, through the trees, Hec could see the only one of the shacks that showed signs of being lived in. A thin spiral of gray smoke drifted from the tin chimney and spread out against the blue sky.

Near the edge of the clearing, Stamp pulled up. The others reined in behind him. "Remember," he said in a low voice, "were looking for three men. But we don't want to shoot any die-hard miners by mistake."

From where Hec sat, he had a clear view of the front of the shack. Only two horses were tied there. Hec pointed this out to Stamp and added, "Let's make sure *we're* not the ones surprised."

Stamp looked at him. "They'll be the ones surprised, not us."

"Depends on how it's handled," Hec said softly.

Either Stamp didn't hear him or chose to ignore it. He ordered the

men to dismount. When they had tied their horses downwind from the animals in front of the shack, Stamp stopped to ponder their next move. Hec watched him from a corner of his eye, wondering what he would do. A schoolteacher-turned-police chief might not have all the savvy needed for such a dangerous job, and Hec wasn't anxious to take a bullet in the head just to improve Stamp's education.

Mendoza and Tornquist, gripping their rifles, hunched down in the brush. Stamp took a position to their right, holding a revolver.

Suddenly, one of the windows of the shack rattled upward, and someone emptied a pan of water out the window. Stamp looked excited. He signaled to Mendoza and Tornquist. "Juan, you and Arne cover the sides and back," he whispered.

"Yeah," Mendoza granted. Still crouching, he began to make a run toward his position. Tornquist was a few feet behind him.

"Shall we make the frontal attack, Ramsey?" Stamp suggested, his voice a little tight.

"Tell you something, Chief. Trapped rats might use fear for courage. Why not give 'em a hello? Give 'em a chance to walk out with their hands up."

"Think they will?"

"Want me to try?"

"Go ahead."

Rising to a half-crouch, Hec cupped his hands to his mouth. "Hey, you men in there!" he shouted.

A startled face appeared at the window, then vanished. The horses in front of the shack began to whinny and pull at their reins.

"We're police!" Hec sang out. "You're surrounded on all sides! Throw out your weapons and march out with your hands wide!"

"Go to hell!" was the shouted reply. Suddenly a rifle barrel appeared at the window. Hec flung himself to one side as three shots raked the brash where he had been but an instant before. Chips of brash stung his cheek. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the rifle barrage ceased.

In the abrupt silence, Hec could hear a breeze stirring the trees overhead.

"This isn't going to be quite the cakewalk I had hoped for," Stamp said thinly.

"Dealing with scum like that never is," Hec said. In the distance he could see Mendoza near some willows, awaiting further orders.

"Guess the safest thing is to wait 'em out," Stamp said.

"If they've got supplies they could hold up in there for a week or

more.”

“Smoke ’em out, maybe.”

“That won’t be easy.” Hec suddenly stiffened, then bent down and put an ear to the ground. When Stamp started to question him, Hec gestured for silence. In a moment, he straightened up. Peering toward the south he said, “Rider comin’.” He spoke quietly.

Stamp frowned, listening. “Yeah, there is,” he agreed. By now the faint roll of hooves could be heard in the stillness.

Gripping his rifle, Hec angled through the thick, shoulder-high brush to where a trail twisted from the back country, leading directly to the shack. A rider approached. He was lank, probably in his midtwenties, his cheeks covered with a red beard.

He reined in, searching the shack and the surrounding area with his eyes. Obviously he had heard the rifle fire and wanted to make sure of the situation before riding further.

Hec abruptly stepped out. He rammed his rifle muzzle against the rider’s lower ribs.

“Just set, friend,” Hec hissed.

“Hold it,” Stamp added, stepping from concealment.

“He is,” Hec said. He jerked free the rider’s saddle gun and tossed it to Stamp. “Keep him covered, Chief.”

Hec reached up, caught the stranger by the wrist, and pulled him from the saddle. He landed hard. Before he could recover, Hec snatched a revolver from the man’s holster. With no break in movement, he seized the reins of the horse, holding it in. He handed the reins to Stamp.

The rider was too dazed to protest when Hec rolled him over onto his stomach. Putting a knee in the man’s back, Hec drew a pair of manacles from his own belt and cuffed the rider’s wrists. Then he pulled the man to a sitting position. “You got a name?”

The man was staring at Hec. “You’re the fella ...” He broke off, his lips locked. He eyed Hec warily, but he seemed impressed by the way Hec had handled him.

“Yeah,” Hec said, “I’m the fella on the stage that day. Now I asked for a name, and I don’t aim to ask again.”

One side of the man’s face was deeply scratched from his fall from the horse. “Name’s Al Hart,” he muttered.

“Who’re your friends down in the shack?”

“Beckley and Simms. Where’s Fenner, anyhow?”

“Jail. Where you’ll all be. Unless you get foolish. Then you’ll be dead.”

He hauled Hart to his feet and made him mount his horse, which he did awkwardly because of the manacled wrists. It was Stamp who wore a look of surprise when Hec swiftly mounted behind him and jammed a revolver into Hart's back.

"What do you think you're doing, Ramsey?" the Chief demanded, casting a worried glance at the shack.

"Hart is takin' me right up to the front door."

"Listen, that's dangerous ..."

"It'll make the boys inside forget about those side windows, Chief." Hec reached around Hart to grab the reins. He kicked the horse into motion.

"Hey, I'm a sitting duck," Hart protested.

"Not if your friends do what you tell 'em. And that is to hold their fire!"

After they had covered a dozen yards, the door of the shack burst open and a man, half-concealed by the wall, fired twice through the doorway. His shots went into the ground near the front legs of the horse, causing the animal to serve. Hec had a time holding it in.

"Beckley!" Hart screamed. "Stop shootin'! You wanna kill me?"

"Then get out from in front of him!" came Beckley's roar. Hec caught a glimpse of the man, broad through the chest and wearing a checked shirt. Before Hec could snap off a shot, Beckley ducked from sight. Hec got the horse moving again.

When he was twenty feet from the cabin, Hec suddenly wheeled the horse broadside so as to use it for cover. In the next moment, he slid from the saddle, pulling Hart after him. Hart nearly lost his balance, but Hec pulled him back on his feet and began to walk him toward the cabin.

The second outlaw, Simms, cried in an excited, high-pitched voice, "We ain't gonna let you just walk him in here!" A pistol shot screamed a few inches above Hart's shoulder. Hec, crouching behind Hart, felt its hot breath. He ducked lower behind the man.

"Come out with your hands up, you twol" Hec yelled. Another shot blasted from the shadowed interior of the cabin. Hec could see the muzzle flash.

Hart was panicking. "For God's sake, hold your fire, boys!"

"We gotta kill him or run!" was Simms's nervous reply.

"You listen good in there!" Hec pushed his prisoner to within a few yards of the cabin door. "Right now, you're just wanted for that stage holdup. You kill this man, or anybody else, and you'll hang for murder!"

There was a sudden rustling of brush to the left of the cabin. Oliver

Stamp had made a crouched run toward the shack. Now he stood up and fired a shot through a side window.

From the shack came Beckley's frantic voice. "Run for it, Simms!" he cried. "Out the back door!"

But at that instant, Juan Mendoza appeared at the opposite window. He smashed in the pane of glass with his rifle barrel.

Hec was pushing Hart into the cabin. Beckley was backed up against a wall, staring. A bullet scratch on his thick neck was bleeding into his shirt. One glance at Hec looming behind the red-bearded Hart and the fight went out of him. He threw down his gun.

"One of 'em got away!" Hec shouted to Stamp, pointing to the wide-open back door.

"Got him!" It was Arne Tornquist, shouting from out back. In a few minutes he appeared, with a dejected Simms in tow. Simms's shirt was torn and smeared with dirt. Arne was grinning.

Stamp looked at Hec and shook his head, as if in disapproval.

It was Mendoza who said, "Ramsey, if you hadn't had the guts to walk up to that front door, we could've been here a week."

"When dark come," Tornquist added, "they might've got clean away."

Stamp looked at the outlaws. "You boys'll have a long time to plan your next stagecoach robbery," he said.

"By the time they get out," Hec put in, "stagecoaches will be a thing of the past. But they'll be too old to think about holdin' up automobiles."

"A good day's work," Stamp said, giving Hec a look of grudging respect. "For *all* of us."

Mendoza smiled behind the Chief's back.

They got ready to ride their prisoners back to town.

One thing pleased Hec above all else. They had found the stagecoach loot intact. He knew that would make a certain woman very happy.

Chapter Ten

The setting sun bronzed Hec Ramsey's face and brought out the softness of Nora Muldoon's features. She stood in the doorway of her pharmacy, an apron over a blue cotton dress. Her eyes were fixed on the gold ring that Hec held between his thumb and forefinger.

He told her about the capture of the outlaws and the recovery of the loot. "I wanted to be sure you got this ring quick as possible," he said.

It had been a rough day and there had been moments when the fight out at Weaver's Landing could have gone either way. But he had been at the dangerous game so long that he was able to shrug off what might have happened. He was a realist.

And very real, very poignant was Nora Muldoon, biting her lower lip as she took the ring from him. Tenderly turning it over in her fingers, she said, "I had forgotten how pretty it is." Hec understood that the beauty of the plain ring was in the memories it held, not in its simple design.

Taking a deep breath, Nora crossed the pharmacy, skirting a display case filled with bottles and fancy French soaps. She unlocked a drawer behind the case, dropped the ring into it, and locked it again.

"Aren't you going to put the ring on?" Hec asked.

She shook her head. "No." She looked at him, then turned to stare out the front window to the street. "Truly, I've been thinking of what that outlaw said when he took the ring. About not needing it without a husband." She looked around at the drawer where she had locked the ring, then faced Hec. "The ring is part of yesterday. To be remembered. But not to be lived as today."

The sentiment she expressed triggered a response in him. He took a sudden step forward, saw her waiting, head back, lips slightly parted. But a sudden shyness stopped him.

"I—I've got one more thing to do yet tonight. But I figure to be done early."

"Early or late," she whispered, "I'll be here."

He started for the door, then abruptly swung around. He bent his head and kissed her gently on the mouth. She stood very still, then lifted a hand to his cheek. When she finally drew back, smiling, he grinned at her. He hurried out of the pharmacy, nearly colliding with a man carrying an armload of bundles.

"Sorry, friend," Hec said with a laugh and strode across the street to

where he had left his horse.

But when he was mounted and heading out of town, his light-hearted mood turned to one less buoyant. He was still tormented by the suspicion that oil and murder were tied together in the Vandemeer case. If oil *was* the motive, he would first have to prove that Ben Ritt *knew* there was oil on the Vandemeer homestead.

The sun was a red disk on the horizon as Hec spurred his black horse across the open country. In the faint glow of the waning day, he saw the Ritt oil derrick ahead, silhouetted against the purpling sky. Beside it, the line shack was a squat shadow. Hec rode on past a shoulder of hills. By the time he reached the shack it was dark enough for someone to have lighted a lamp. But no light showed at the single window. There seemed to be no one about.

Frowning, he dismounted and pushed open the shack door, one hand clamped around his gun. The place was empty. In the half-dark, he found a lamp, which he lit and set on a shelf. Then he looked around. A jumble of odd metal castings littered the floor. Along one wall were pigeonholes containing rolled-up papers that he knew could well be maps. In the middle of the room was a drawing board made of planks laid on sawhorses.

This line shack was what it was supposed to be—a storeroom and headquarters for Ritt's drilling operation. But the well on this piece of land did not interest Hec. He wanted to see if any further plans had been made. Plans that went beyond the boundaries of the Ritt land holdings.

Moving to the pigeonholes, he drew out several of the rolled-up papers. They concerned previous drilling operations, all failures. One paper, however, interested him. It was labeled "Research and Exploration."

He spread the paper out on the drawing board to get a better look at it. Apparently, it was a map of the Ritt holdings and the surrounding areas. The Ritt borders, Hec noted, were drawn in India ink, while the homesteads beyond were identified by the surnames of the owners: Wilson, O'Malley, Devereaux. And Vandemeer.

Hec swore softly under his breath as he continued to study the map. There were a half-dozen red X's on the ranch itself, labeled "Test 1" through "Test 6." Each of these had been canceled through with a heavy black line. Obviously they represented wells that had come up dry.

One red X, though, had not been eliminated, and that one was on the Vandemeer homestead, near the stream Hec had been shown by the Osage brave.

Hec's smile in the lamplight was not pretty.

The sudden sound of approaching hoofbeats alerted him. Quickly he rolled up the map and the other papers and put them back in their pigeonholes. Then he opened the shack door. He stayed away from the door, his gun loose in his holster, his arms folded. Right now, he wanted to play a waiting game—provided they allowed it. If not, someone would end up very dead this evening. Maybe even one Hec Ramsey.

In the darkness of the night, he glimpsed three riders approaching the shack. He thought of Nora Muldoon, thought of his own hazardous life. That was the trouble when a man found a pretty woman who appealed to him. He began worrying about his own hide.

Before he had a chance to dwell on this, the three men dismounted and, with a jingle of spurs, approached the door.

Roy Fletcher, gripping a carbine and looking more like a saloon bouncer than a geologist, stormed into the shack.

“Hold it, Ramsey!” he said angrily.

“Hold what?” Hec said mildly. “Hell, I’m only payin’ a call on your boss.”

“I’ve heard about you, Ramsey,” Steve Ritt said nervously as he entered the shack. “Kill a man for the price on his head.”

“Careful with that kind of talk,” Hec warned, no longer mild. Outside, holding a pistol, was one of the workers Hec had seen on his previous visit. The man was wearing grease-smeared overalls.

“Just what’re you doing here, Ramsey?” Fletcher asked, sneering.

“Was ridin’ over to see Mr. Ritt at the ranch house. Saw a light burning here.”

“You’re a liar!”

Hec glared at him. “I wouldn’t go sayin’ a thing like that if I was you, Mr. Fletcher.”

“There was no light here!” Fletcher persisted.

“We going to argue about it?”

“You could be shot for breakin’ and enterin’!” Steve Ritt cried.

“If you made yourself judge and jury, maybe. No other way.”

Fletcher seemed to sense young Ritt’s nervousness and the possibility that it might lead to some rash and dangerous move. “All right, cool off, Steve,” he said. “Better go get your father.”

“We can handle him ourselves!” Steve replied. At his belt was a .38 in a cross-drawn holster.

“What’d you have in mind?” Fletcher asked thinly. When young Ritt failed to respond, the geologist turned to the man in overalls. “Tell Mr. Ritt were waitin’ for him. You know where to find him.”

The man hesitated. "You'll be all right?"

"Hammond, for Christ's sake do what I tell you. And if you run into your sidekick, Tucker, kick him in the pants for me. He's s'posed to guard this place." He suddenly wheeled on Ramsey. "Or did you find him here and kill him?"

Hec shook his head. "I don't go around killing people, Fletcher. Not unless there's no other way. There was nobody here."

Fletcher studied him for a minute, his hands white against the carbine. There was a smear of oil on his brown pants. "Tucker probably found a bottle somewhere. He won't get drunk on me again, I can tell you that." He jerked his chin at Hammond. "Get going."

"Why don't we *all* ride and see Mr. Ritt?" Hec suggested.

Fletcher pointed the carbine. "You just keep your back to the wall and your hands loose, understand?"

"If there's no other way."

"There isn't."

Hec's smile was grim. Young Ritt, suddenly deflated, sat down on a nail keg. He looked worried. Fletcher, more experienced and much cooler, seemed content to wait it out.

Within thirty minutes, they heard the sounds of hard-ridden horses coming to a halt, and Ben Ritt's voice ordering Hammond to stay outside. Ritt, dressed in the same expensive cattleman's outfit as he had worn on the stagecoach, came storming into the shack.

"Hammond claims you've got some cock and bull story about coming to see me, Ramsey."

"He's right. And it's not cock and bull, Mr. Ritt."

Ritt's round face turned an angry red. "If you were comin' to see me, *why* were you comin'?"

"Why, to return the money and watch you lost in that stage holdup." When Ritt glared suspiciously, Hec gave him a hard smile and added, "I'll go get it."

He headed for Fletcher, who was holding the carbine. Giving the geologist a warning glance, he went out to his horse. Hammond, a blocky shadow against the starlight, stared as Hec removed a bulky envelope from the saddlebags and returned to the shack.

"Caught the holdup men," Hec drawled, handing the envelope to Ritt.

Ritt wasn't convinced yet, but he did rip open the envelope. Once he was satisfied that it did in fact contain his belongings, he tossed the package on the drawing board and gave Hec the full impact of his small brown eyes.

"All right, Ramsey. I don't believe that, and you didn't expect me to believe it. But you can stick to that story. I could turn you loose, but that wouldn't get either of us anywhere."

Hec just shrugged.

"Why'd you really come here, Ramsey?"

Hec decided the moment was right to plunge. "Did you know there was oil on the Vandemeer place?"

Ritt stared, apparently stunned by the implication. Then, suddenly his temper boiled over. With a cry of rage he sprang at Hec and backhanded him across the face. Hec managed to turn his head slightly and avoid the full force of the blow, but it did force him to take a backward step. He clenched his fists, then noticed that Fletcher was pointing the carbine at his stomach. And Steve Ritt, sweating, had drawn and cocked his .38.

But Ben Ritt waved the weapons aside. "Never mind that!" he cried, his voice still shaking with anger. "I don't hit a man when he's under a gun." He shook a fist at Hec. "But no man calls me a murderer. You understand?"

Hec rubbed at the red mark Ritt's knuckles had made on his cheek.

"Now, you want some more of me, come ahead!" Ritt threatened. He stood there, an older man, his fists raised. In that moment, Hec almost admired the rancher's grit. He managed to suppress some of his own anger.

"Right now, I'll settle for an answer to my question, Mr. Ritt."

"The answer is *no*! I didn't know there was oil at the Vandemeer place. I don't know there is *now*. And neither do you!"

"You've got a map here with a red X marked on the Vandemeer homestead."

"Oh, *that*!" Ritt stormed to a pigeonhole and dragged out the map Hec had been looking at earlier. He unrolled it on the table, his hands shaking. "Take another look, Ramsey. Look at the half-dozen places I had marked on my own spread. Places we thought there was oil. We drilled and didn't find one damned drop."

"That doesn't explain ..."

"You want to bet your money there's oil at the Vandemeer place, the odds are four to one against you." He was referring to himself, Steve, Fletcher, and Hammond, who was still outside.

"Odds are higher'n that now, Mr. Ritt," Hec said quietly. "Whoever thought that oil was worth trying for went and bet his life."

"Maybe so. Now don't bet yours." Ritt stepped away from the door. "I've had enough of you for one night, Ramsey. Get going."

Without another word, Hec stepped out and mounted his horse. He

did not ride easy until he had skirted the rock outcropping where they all had taken shelter when the well blew in.

Moonlight flooded the trail he followed across the grassland. Somewhere an owl hooted and he heard the yap-yapping of a coyote. Well, he had stepped into the bear's nest tonight. What had he gained? Quite a lot, he told himself grimly.

Something like a hot wire suddenly seared his right side. He saw distant muzzle flash, heard the report of a pistol. Then he was flinging himself from the saddle ...

Chapter Eleven

Three more shots crashed from a thicket of saplings ahead. Hec, barely able to see the trees out in the moonlight, tumbled from his horse and flung himself face down on the ground. As he fell, he drew his gun from its holster and sent two quick shots at the spot where he had seen the muzzle flash. In the sudden silence that followed, he lay waiting. All he wanted was to see another muzzle flash that would give him a direct target. None came.

Instead, he heard the sounds of a horse moving away at a hard run. Only when the sounds were completely gone did he get to his feet. His horse, reins trailing, had veered away and was now tangled up in the buckbrush. Hec freed it, tied the reins to a stump.

He thought about going after the sniper who had almost cut him down, but he knew from experience that wild pursuit in moonlight would get him nothing. Besides, he had more important things to do. His side hurt him. Putting a hand to his rib cage, he felt a wetness there. More annoyed than hurt, he decided to find out what he could by investigating the immediate area. He finally reached a spot in the heavy brush beside the trail where the ambusher had awaited him. He could see where the brush was crushed. He also noted several distinct hoofprints in the soft dirt.

Hec squatted on his heels and studied the prints for a moment. Selecting the best one, he covered the indentation with a handkerchief. He weighted the handkerchief with three rocks, then walked—a little painfully—back to where the first shot had caught him. He recalled hearing the thunk of it into a tree trunk to his right.

Luckily, the moonlight was soon bright enough to enable him to find what he was looking for. After briefly examining three cottonwoods beside the trail, he found one whose bark was freshly torn. Favoring his injured right side, Hec removed a jackknife from his pocket, opened the blade, and began to dig into the torn bark for the bullet. At last he freed it.

After dropping the bullet into his shirt pocket, he got his horse. With much difficulty and pain, he mounted and rode in the direction of town.

Davey Watson was walking street patrol when Hec reached the main street. The officer peered over the swinging doors of the saloon, then continued on his patrol.

Hec pulled up across the street, in front of Doc Coogan's place.

Watson saw him and crossed the street. "Evenin', sir," the young officer said.

Hec nodded. "Where's Doc tonight?"

"At the lodge. It's his night for poker." Then he noticed the stain on Hec's shirt. "You hurt?" he asked, his eyes wide with concern.

"Just pinked is all. Give me a hand, Davey."

Watson reached up to help him. In order to dismount, Hec had to withdraw his left hand from the wound; it was stained with blood.

"You're bleedin' bad. I better go fetch Doc." Watson started away, but Hec called him back.

"Bleedin's stopped mostly." He glanced up the street, noting a light in the rear of the Muldoon Pharmacy. "I know where to get help. Leave Doc to his poker game."

Hec started off, then turned. "Look to my horse, will you?"

"Sure, but you shouldn't be walkin'. Not in the fix you're in."

"I'm all right, thanks." He made his way up the walk and across the street. Two drunks, arms linked, staggered toward him, bellowing lyrics to an off-key tune. Hec saw them look at him. With his hand pressed to his side, slightly hunched, he probably appeared as drunk as they were. Despite the aggravation of the wound, he had to grin.

Under the flare of a street light he paused for breath, almost losing his nerve. Then, filling his lungs with the crisp night air, he cut along the slot between two buildings to the rear of the pharmacy. Knocking on the door, he called out softly, "Nora Muldoon, it's Hec Ramsey. I could use a little help."

She ran lightly to the door, withdrew the bolt, and flung it open. She was in a quilted bathrobe, and her long hair was braided. "Are you hurt?" she gasped, peering out at him.

"Bee sting." She stepped aside while he entered and made his way to the kitchen. He plopped himself down in a chair. An open book lay beside a lamp.

She paled as she saw the blood on his shirt. "Bee sting? You're not much of a humorist, Hec Ramsey. He explained that Doc Coogan was not at home, but she cut him off.

"You should have come here in the first place. Now off with that shirt."

When his shirt was off, she took one look at his wound and her face flooded with relief. "Thank God it's no worse. Wait right there."

"I'm not goin' anywhere." He gave a faint grin at her back as she hurried into the pharmacy.

She knew how to treat wounds, he had to admit. She washed it with

some strong solution that stung then covered it with a plaster patch. As she finished the bandaging she said, "Wouldn't think twice of riding off anywhere without your gun. But carry a bit of bandage and some hydrogen peroxide? No, that's nonsense. Serve you right if one day you caught your outlaws, then pricked your finger and died of blood poisoning."

"Guess it wouldn't be a bad idea to carry a kit of some kind."

"No, it wouldn't be a bad idea at all."

"Think you could rig something up for the men in the department?"

"Don't be humoring me."

"I'm not. I'm serious."

She searched his face, then smiled. "Yes, I guess you are serious."

"In more ways than one," he said, looking up at her in the lamplight. She flushed slightly.

Her son's sleepy voice came from the bedroom; the door was ajar. "Mother, is anything the matter?"

"Everything's fine," she called. "Mr. Ramsey is—visiting."

"Hello sir," the boy called.

"'Lo, son."

"Can I come out, Mother?"

"You go back to sleep, young man." She crossed over and closed the bedroom door.

Hec stood up, looked at his bandaged wound, flexed his fingers, and extended his arms. Except for a slight twinge of pain, he could move without difficulty. He was thankful for that.

His shirt was a mess because of the dried blood, but she helped him on with it. He was buttoning it when they heard a loud rapping on the rear door. Hec was about to draw his gun when he heard Chief Stamp call out his name.

Nora Muldoon hurried to unlock the door for him.

Stamp came charging into the kitchen, his face concerned. "Davey Watson told me where you'd gone. You all right?" He stared at the bloodied shirt.

"I'm all right now." Hec looked at Nora.

Stamp seemed to understand what the look between them meant, but he didn't pursue it. "Doc Coogan is out at the Wilsons'."

"Thought it was his poker night."

"Was. Tom Wilson's wife has a fever. I sent Davey over there to fetch Doc for you."

Hec shook his head. "No need. The wound doesn't call for stitching."

"I'd just as soon have the doctor tell me that, if you don't mind." He leaned into the lamplight. "Mind telling me what happened to you?"

Hec ignored the faint sarcasm. "Somebody tried to bushwhack me in the dark. Was on my way back from Ritt's."

"And you didn't see who it was," Stamp said in a flat voice.

Hec reached into his pocket and withdrew the bullet he had taken from the tree. "Didn't see him. But I dug out his calling card." He showed Stamp the flattened piece of lead. "I also marked a place where his horse left hoofprints. Looked to me like the animal had one cracked shoe."

"We'll take a look in the morning," Stamp said.

Hec shook his head. "Can't risk letting the overnight weather rub it out. Was figurin' to ride out soon as I got patched up." He smiled at Nora.

Stamp looked skeptical. "*Can* you ride?"

"He shouldn't, is the point," Nora Muldoon put in quickly.

"I'm all right," Hec insisted.

Stamp stepped back from the table. "I'll get my horse."

Hec put up a hand to stop him. "I can handle it."

"Maybe so, but from now on I don't want you going out on investigations alone. 'Specially when there's a good chance of danger."

"I didn't think there was."

"Hell you didn't—begging your pardon, Mrs. Muldoon." Stamp turned back to Hec. "Never mind what you think. Let's do things a certain way. At all times."

"Yes *sir*."

Stamp frowned at him, then relaxed slightly, almost smiling. He headed for the back door.

When Stamp was gone, Nora said, "Isn't he something? I thought he came here because he was worried for you."

"I think he was."

"Seemed more like rapping your knuckles."

Hec gave her a slow smile. "Yeah, well ... I think he's beginning to like me. And it's killing him."

"I wish you wouldn't ride tonight, Hec."

He took her hands. "I want to thank you, Nora."

She seemed distraught. "This sort of thing—Hec, pay attention to me."

"I am."

"I mean being shot at and such ..." She bit her lip. "It happens all

the time in your work, doesn't it?"

"Used to. Not too much any more. Why?"

A sudden sadness seemed to come over her. "I was thinking ... It was wise of you not to marry. To have no family." She stepped away quickly, withdrawing her hands from his.

He studied her, knowing what she meant. "Was it wise for *you* to marry? And have a family?"

Nora looked startled. "What do you mean?"

"You married a safe, gentle man."

"I—I did," she faltered.

"But he died and left you alone with a child."

Her voice tightened. "That's not the same. Not the same at all." She looked down at the floor.

"Nothing's the same. And nothing's sure. You can't choose what's going to happen. You can only choose what you want now. At this minute!"

She lifted her head, meeting his eyes. He was testing her courage, but he did not press it. "Good night, Nora," he said softly. As he left her, he called, "Don't forget to lock your door."

Oliver Stamp was outside waiting for him. He had already mounted and was holding the reins of Hec's horse.

"Got to get some things first," Hec said. "Things from my trunk."

"I don't see ..." Stamp began, but he cut himself short. "Yeah, go ahead," he said.

Stamp waited a good five minutes, holding in Hec's horse. At last Hec appeared, carrying a small paper bag and a canteen. Stamp remained silent as Hec stuffed the sack into his saddlebags and slung the canteen from the saddle horn.

"We're not riding desert," Stamp finally commented, more out of curiosity than anything else. "Why the canteen of water? Or is it something other than water?"

"Never carry whiskey in a canteen." Hec's smile was taut. "It's water. Also a little dried plaster. In the sack."

"Guess I know by now that I'd be asking fool questions if I wanted to know what the plaster is for," Stamp said as they rode out of town.

"Not a fool question at all. I had to learn it. Other people did before me."

"Don't tell me. Show me."

Hec made no reply. He wanted to conserve his energy for more important things. It had been quite an evening. His wound, thought not serious, throbbed. He was also remembering what Nora Muldoon

had said about men leading a dangerous life, men who should never marry and have a family. Sometimes, as now, he wondered if it had all been worth it—the constant danger instead of a hearth and toddlers. Well, he'd sent some bad ones to the gallows and disposed of others at gunpoint so that people like Nora and her late husband could live a little easier. There had to be some people to rid the world of scum.

Oliver Stamp, riding close at his side in the darkness, seemed to sense his mood. "You're damned quiet, Ramsey."

"After you've been shot at, it's a night for quiet."

The moon was full by the time they reached the scene of the ambush. "Here it is," Hec said.

"You have an Indian's sense of trail in the dark," Stamp commented as he swung down.

"No. That's one thing I *wish* I had. How much we could learn from those people if we'd only give them half a chance."

"Do you think they're savages?"

"We're the savages."

Hec dismounted, enjoying Stamp's slight gasp of surprise. From the paper sack Hec took a wooden bowl and the dried plaster. He poured in water from the canteen and mixed it with the plaster.

Stamp watched him for a time then said, "I think you're right. About savages."

"Maybe fifty years from now a few others will think so too." The moon swung behind a cloud, dimming the land, then speared through a break and shone full again. Hec, crouching in a golden pool of moonlight, slowly poured the plaster and water mixture into the impression left by the hoofprint he had covered with his handkerchief. He could feel Stamp's breath on the back of his neck, the Chief was that close. An observer watching the tranquil scene would have a hard time believing that a near tragedy had occurred here only a few hours before.

When the hoofprint was filled, Hec fanned it with his hat to hasten the hardening of the plaster. Finally Hec withdrew the cast. The print showed a cracked shoe, as Hec had predicted. Unless the shoe was replaced or the horse threw it, this was a direct lead to the man who had tried to shoot Hec out of the saddle. The man who probably had killed the Vandemeers.

Stamp appeared fascinated by the procedure. "This is modern police work," he breathed.

"It used to be nightstick and gun barrel. Yes, things are changing." Hec placed the cast in the paper sack and mounted up, granting a little at the pain of his wound.

They rode back to town, not a word spoken between them.

As they neared the livery stable, Stamp said, "Mind if I put your horse up for the night? You've had quite a day."

"Like to tend to him myself, Chief."

"You're a hard man to understand, Ramsey."

"Reckon we all are, one way or another." Hec almost expected Stamp to mutter "Touché." But he didn't. He went silently to his own stall in the livery barn. Hec saw him shaking his head in bewilderment as the hostler came out to take his horse.

Chapter Twelve

Hec's side was so stiff when he awoke the next morning that he could barely roll out of bed. But once he had gotten up and walked around his hotel room for five minutes, the stiffness began to ease. And so did the pain. No blood poisoning, thank God, or he wouldn't have been able even to swing his legs off the bed. How many men had died from superficial wounds out on the frontier, simply because they hadn't had proper medication or anyone to administer it. He thought of Nora Muldoon. She was a brave woman to try and make a life for herself and young son here in this hectic place. A woman needed a man to protect her. But Nora Muldoon seemed fairly self-sufficient, more so than most women he had known.

After breakfast of steak and eggs at Rafferty's Cherokee Strip French Restaurant, he walked to the police building, anxious to get to work trying to prove his suspicions concerning murder and attempted murder.

Stamp came into the room that, since the day before, was serving as Hec's laboratory.

"How do you feel this morning?" the Chief asked.

"Main thing is, how will our suspect feel when we nail his hide to the barn door?"

"Can we?"

"With a little luck."

Hec lifted a bullet with a tweezers and placed it on a microscope plate. It was the bullet he had dug out of the tree. He opened a matchbox and, with the tweezers, lifted out the bullets that had killed the Vandemeers. He placed the bullet labeled "Helen Vandemeer" beside the first one on the plate.

"Want to have a look?" he invited the Chief.

Stamp bent his head to peer into the microscope. "Christ, far as I can tell, they're identical," he said grimly. "The one fired at you last night exactly matches the one that destroyed Helen Vandemeer's brain."

"I think we've got that luck I was talking about." Hec wrapped the bullets in cotton wadding and placed them in the matchbox. "At least it proves once and for all that there is a killer."

"Who knew you were going out to Ritt's last night?"

Hec gave Stamp a thoughtful look, then said, "You knew. Everyone

in the office here did. It happened coming back, so everybody on the Ritt spread would've known by then."

Stamp pondered this, then said, "I was thinkin' we might check their guns."

"No." Hec shook his head. "Soon as word got around what we were doin', the killer would lose that gun. Lose it where it could never be found."

"Well, I suppose you're right," Stamp said.

"There's something else we might try, though."

Stamp looked at him. "Now I don't want any wild-haired plots."

"Not wild-haired. Just a long chance."

"What've you got in mind, Ramsey?"

"Bring in a witness who saw the Vandemeers killed," Hec said meaningfully.

"Witness?" Stamp looked surprised. "There isn't any."

"The killer doesn't know that."

Stamp sank into a chair near Hec. "Ramsey, you're not making one damn bit of sense."

"Last night not only proved there is a killer—" Hec paused. "It also showed we're getting close."

"Go on," Stamp prompted.

"If *that* makes him jump, a witness might panic him into making some fool play."

"Trying to kill the make-believe witness. And *you!*"

"Something like that."

"Just who could you get to join you in *that*?" Stamp asked skeptically.

"Have to be somebody reasonable. And someone with enough belly to play it out."

"Just who would that be?" Stamp demanded. But Hec didn't have to reply, for at that moment Juan Mendoza put his head in the door and said that members of the Town Council were waiting to see the Chief on a business matter.

Stamp grumbled something Hec couldn't hear.

Hec put his microscope and the matchbox back into his trunk and left. He went back to his hotel room yearning to remove the plaster that covered his wound—it had begun to itch maddeningly. But when he tried to pull it off, he felt a sting of pain. The hell with it, he thought.

Looking down at the wound reminded him how close the ambusher had come to killing him. Hec leaned back on his bed, trying to sort out

the pieces of the puzzle that had been presented so far. He knew one thing—the ambusher was either an amateur or had been caught out with only a handgun. He knew it was a pistol from the sound of it, for one thing. And he did have the bullet. That was of real value. Had a rifle been used, he knew all too well, the ending might have been entirely different. He'd probably still be lying out there somewhere, badly wounded. Or dead.

He got up and walked over to the window. The street was crowded as usual with its many vehicles—buggies and buckboards and the inevitable freight wagons hauling in supplies to keep the town alive. He wondered how long he could stay here. Oliver Stamp barely tolerated him. Hec had shown him some new ideas in police work, and the Chief had seemed to be impressed, but Stamp, a holdover from the old school, still regarded him with suspicion. “Shoot 'em or bring 'em in to hang!” had been the way it was done. Now there were other ways.

Hec saw the Town Council members strutting down the walk, talking together. He wondered what business they'd had with the Chief. There was Wingate, the jeweler, his glasses catching the reflection of the sun as he gestured angrily to Drew and Harley.

Politicians, Hec thought with a wry grin. Always poking a stick in the hornet's nest.

He put on a clean shirt and considered going to Doc Coogan's for a shave, but decided not to risk it. He had enough wounds for one day. He'd shave later. Anyway, appearance didn't count for much where he was planning to ride today.

As he left the hotel, he almost collided with Earl Enright. The land agent glared, then seeing who it was, smiled.

“Don't want to get on the wrong side of the new Deputy Chief,” he grinned. “Sorry I nearly ran you down.”

“Was the other way around,” Hec smiled.

“How about coming to the office? I've always got a pot of coffee warming.”

“Yeah, I'd like that.” Hec joined him in a brisk hike to the land office.

Enright unlocked the door, stepped around the long counter, and beckoned to Hec. He waved to a swivel chair. “Make yourself at home, Ramsey.”

Hec sat down while Enright poured coffee into thick mugs. He waited for Enright to say what was on his mind.

Enright stood at the counter, sipping his coffee slowly. “I hear somebody took a shot at you last night,” he said after a few moments.

"Kind of close."

"You're still alive, and I'm glad of that."

"So am I," Hec said dryly.

"Ramsey, is there any way I can help you? I mean, that dirty Vandemeer business keeps riling me up." The land agent shook his head. "Such a terrible thing to happen to such fine people."

"I didn't know them. Everybody seems to think they were fine people. Everybody but one, that is."

Enright's sparse brows lifted. "And who is that?" he asked in surprise.

"The fella who killed 'em. Reckon he didn't think much of 'em."

"Oh, yes, I see what you mean." Enright drank his coffee and stared at his file cabinets. "I just wonder if the name of the killer isn't somewhere in those records."

"If you get any ideas, you let me know, Enright."

"Let's make it a first-name basis. Earl."

"All right, Earl." Hec heaved himself to his feet.

"By the way, Hector ..."

Hec winced. "First name is Hec, if you don't mind."

Enright gave a nervous laugh, then sobered. "What I'm getting at is this."

"I figured you were ridin' a pretty wide trail. Glad you decided to get to the point."

"You know, some of these pompous frauds in town could have coveted the Vandemeer place."

"Who?"

"No one specifically. I know you suspect Ben Ritt ..."

"Haven't said I did."

"Hammond, one of the roustabouts that works for Ritt, was in town this morning. He was telling a wild story at Joe's Café, saying you practically accused Ritt of the murders."

Hec's laugh rang through the office "Hell, I went out there to return stolen property. Hammond better change his brand of whiskey. Man dreams stuff like that oughta quit the bottle entirely." Hec's gaze fastened on Enright's face. "You mentioned pompous frauds."

"Take Wingate, for instance. Before he opened his jewelry store he was mighty interested in land."

"Land is why most folks came here in the first place."

Enright was undaunted. "There's Harley. And Drew."

"Town Council."

"That put halos on their heads?" Enright lifted his coffee cup, stared at Hec over the rim. "Take Judge Tate ..."

The door suddenly banged open. As if on cue, Judge Tate barged in, his homburg pulled low. He gave Hec a thin glance, apparently remembering his undignified retreat under a gaming table the afternoon Jim Fenner was apprehended.

"Is this how you earn your money, Ramsey?" He jerked his homburg at the coffee cups. "Whiling away the hours with Earl Enright when you're supposed to be chasing criminals?"

Hec chuckled. "You're riled over nothing, Judge." He glanced at Enright. "What were you about to tell me when the Judge came in?"

"I'll tell you in a minute, Ramsey. Judge, what can I do for you?"

Tate was looking suspiciously at both of them. "Just what *were* you telling him, Enright?"

Hec noted with admiration that Enright seemed unruffled by Tate's sudden appearance. "Ramsey and I were talking about his days as a U.S. marshal."

Tate snorted and stepped closer to the counter. "I'm here on behalf of a client, Enright."

Hec stepped outside, closing the door on whatever else the Judge had to say. In addition to his position on the bench, Hec had learned, Judge Tate also had a lucrative law practice.

Hec walked down to the livery stable. The hostler was just grooming his black gelding. Christy, the blacksmith-stableman, waved a thick arm at him from across the barn. Hec gave him a nod.

When the hostler was finished, Hec mounted up. With his rifle in the saddleboot and his snub-nosed Colt in his belt, Hec rode out of town.

Several pairs of eyes watched Hec make his exit. Nora Muldoon was dusting her display window at the pharmacy when she saw him ride down the street. Her heart caught because she sensed he was once again riding into danger.

Judge Tate, stepping from Enright's office, turned to glare after Hec. "Damn reckless fool," he said aloud.

Enright was in the doorway of his office. "Ramsey is a credit to this town, Judge."

"Stick to your land maps, Earl," the Judge snapped. "What you know about law enforcement wouldn't be enough to plug an ant hole."

"Why don't you like Ramsey?"

"He damn near got me shot. I don't know who's worse, him or Jim Fenner."

From a barred window of the jail, Jim Fenner's eyes also followed Hec's progress out of town. Fenner pushed his face against the cold bars until he could no longer see the Deputy Chief. What he said about Ramsey was even more uncomplimentary than Judge Tate's remarks. Fenner referred to Ramsey's canine ancestry in such a loud voice that Mendoza had to step into the jail corridor and tell him to shut up.

"There's women and kids out on that street, Fenner!"

Fenner locked his lips and glared at his three cell mates. They had allowed the police to trick them, the fools. But he himself was mostly to blame, he had to secretly admit, for falling for the ruse of the bracelet. Fenner had since learned that the bracelet had been borrowed from the jewelry store.

Al Hart ran a hand over his fuzz of red beard and said, "I'll double what you just yelled about Ramsey."

"I hope somebody shoots the bastard out of the saddle," put in Simms, who was hunched on his cot.

The other one, Beckley, sat brooding in silence.

Chapter Thirteen

It was a bright day. Sunlight touched creek waters that twisted through willows. Hec allowed his gelding to pick its own pace, but he remained alert. He had no intention of giving an ambusher a second try.

Finally reaching a wooded knoll, Hec pulled up. In a shallow valley below he could see several skin tents. Children scampered and dogs barked or lazed in the sun. One old man was herding goats to higher ground.

Hec rode down toward this Osage encampment. The sounds of his approach alerted the village. The children grew silent.

Hec swung his horse over to the old brave with the goats. The goats were now spreading out on thin grass. As the old man watched him suspiciously, Hec gave the sign of peace, his right hand lifted, palm open.

“Old one, I look for Rides-with-the-Sun.” Hec explained that he had met the brave and his son in town at the Vandemeer funeral. He didn’t know how much the old man understood, but he did recognize the name. His wrinkled face turned south. He pointed a gnarled hand. “There.”

Hec saw a brave working a string of mustangs some distance beyond the encampment. Hec thanked the old man and rode away, the goats parting to make a path for the black horse. Once in open country, Hec put the mount to a canter.

Rides-with-the-Sun gave a grunt of greeting and, without another word, led the way to his wickiup.

Sitting cross-legged on blankets, the two men were silent for a time. Then the Osage brave said, “You have come with news of my dead friends?”

“The Vandemeers. How did you know?”

The Osage barely smiled. “I feel you are a man who does not give up a trail once he has started.”

Hec nodded. Daylight seeped through a smoke-hole in the top of the buckskin dwelling. A squaw brought in two bowls of food, and Hec ate bits of meat and roots with his fingers. This was the Indian way. Time meant little. After they ate, he shared a pipe of strong tobacco.

At last the brave put aside his pipe. “You know who killed my friends?”

Hec told of the visit to the Ben Ritt's oil rig, and of the attempted ambush. "I need a witness," he said. "Will you help me avenge the Vandemeers?"

The Osage pondered this, staring at the intricate design on the blanket he sat on. Hec explained his request in more detail.

"As a true witness," the Osage said at last, "would they not wonder why I did not come forward before this?"

"Because you're an Indian," Hec said, leaning close.

"Because I am an Indian?" The brave's eyes narrowed. "I think I understand, but I want to be sure."

"As an Indian, you don't trust the white man's justice."

"Ah ..." The Osage allowed a faint smile to stir his lips. "Yes, the white man will sooner believe his enemies than his friends."

Hec was eager now. "I'll say I found a sign that you were near the Vandemeer house when it happened, that I came out here, and that you finally admitted you saw the killings."

The Osage brave's eyes were penetrating in the bar of sunlight from the roof vent. "You will ride *with* me when we go to do this?"

"The two of us, yes."

"A killer who has been revealed does not think there is much to lose by killing again."

"He can only hang once."

The Osage started to get up. "Shall we leave now?"

Hec shook his head. "Tomorrow morning."

"But ..." The brave seemed disappointed.

"I need a day to set the trap," Hec explained.

"And we will be bait for the trap."

"We share the danger," Hec said.

"Those people—the Vandemeers. I feel it deeply, their death." The Osage placed a hand over his heart.

When Hec rode away from the encampment, he waved to the old man with the goats. The old man lifted his staff to acknowledge the greeting. By now the goats were on higher ground, where grass was thicker and greener than in the valley. The sun burned brightly through tall trees when Hec entered a stand of willows. He saw a snake twisting away and reached for his gun. When he saw it wasn't a rattler, he let it go.

He fell to thinking of his plans with the Osage. It just might work. They didn't have a damn thing to lose but their necks ...

Ben Ritt was taking an early-morning ride. Since the days when he

had come up the Chisholm Trail as a forty-dollar-a-month cowhand, he had done his best thinking in the saddle. These days he was a long way from forty dollars a month, he reflected. He had doubled his bets and had been extremely lucky. He raised the best horses in the territory and they brought top money. He went to St. Louis once a year to have his tailoring done. He had sent his son Steve to a fine college. But Steve had his late uncle's restlessness and would not stick to his books. It didn't matter. The uncle, Ben Ritt's brother, had left a half-million-dollar estate, mostly in Colombian emeralds. Steve would have his own chance, hopefully in oil. Ben had allowed his son to use his own judgment in hiring a geologist. It had been a bad move, Ritt thought ruefully. He wondered if Roy Fletcher knew oil from beer, the way he puttered around his damned charts, made X's, sank wells, and came up with nothing. Every dry hole drained away a little more of Ritt's cash. The stakes were too damned high now to back off. He *had* to make a strike. "No matter who gets in my way!" He was startled by the sound of his own angry voice.

As he pushed his horse through a grove of willows, he heard a rider ahead. Drawing rein, he peered through the thick growth and saw Hec Ramsey not fifty yards ahead.

Ritt turned cold when he thought of how Ramsey had faced them all in the line shack last night, that half-sneer on his lips, as if daring someone to make a move. Ritt rubbed the knuckles of the right hand along a seam of his pants. At least he'd had the satisfaction of backhanding the tinhorn badge-toter. There had been a time when you would have gunned down an enemy, or hanged him. But something about Ramsey made him uneasy.

He wondered if Ramsey had learned that one Ben Ritt had vehemently protested the appointment of Hector Ramsey as deputy chief. Ritt had tried to use his influence with the Town Council. But Judge Tate, probably out of sheer orneriness, had blocked him. Sometimes Ritt wondered just how involved Judge Tate might be in affairs other than those of the bench. Since coming here, Tate had acted as Ritt's lawyer. Many times Ritt had considered firing him, but it could be dangerous. As judge, Tate was in a position to pay off those who double-crossed him.

Now, as Ritt saw Ramsey ahead, he was tempted to try for a lucky shot. A decade ago, that's how he would have handled it. But even ten years back, he would have hesitated. It would have been a rash act when a man of Ramsey's reputation was involved. Ramsey had survived many attempts on his life. Those who had tried were dead—either from Ramsey's gun or from Judge Parker's rope.

Ritt withdrew his hand from the butt of the saddle gun. He swore

softly as Ramsey disappeared through the trees where the trail dipped from sight. His words were as heated as Jim Fenner's had been that morning at the city jail.

Curious as to where Ramsey had been, he began to backtrack him. When he finally saw the Osage encampment below, he wondered if that had been Ramsey's destination. And if so, why?

Thoughtfully, Ritt turned his horse. He would have a talk with his son Steve and with Roy Fletcher before the hour was done. They had to pool their information; they had to make plans and try to outguess Hec Ramsey. There was something in Ramsey's eyes that turned a man cold.

Chapter Fourteen

Hec Ramsey didn't know it at the time, but his plans with the Osage brave Rides-with-the-Sun would be slightly delayed.

At the jail, the contract for feeding prisoners had gone to Saddler's A-1 Café. More or less to occupy his mind while awaiting trial, Jim Fenner had memorized each detail of each of the three daily feedings. A breakfast of mush was delivered in a big covered pot by pushcart from the café. At noon, the meal was really supper—hot beef, biscuits, gravy, sometimes pie. At night they had cold meat and whatever was left over from the noon meal.

Usually the job of feeding them was handled by Jody Brice, the kid who also worked as hostler at the stable. Brice earned an extra two dollars a week for pushing the cart three times a day from the A-1 to the jail.

On several occasions Fenner had considered making a break. Jody Brice would be easy to handle. But the thought of Hec Ramsey in the same building gave him pause. He had the feeling that Ramsey would show about as much emotion in gunning a man down as he would in polishing a boot. Several times Ramsey had come down the jail corridor with that slouching walk of his and peered through the bars at them. Just that. Just looked at them with those snake eyes of his that prickled the back of a man's neck and made him think of prayers and gravestones.

But today, Fenner recalled, Hec Ramsey was out of town. He had seen him ride out and had not seen him return. And Fenner had spent all morning at the window, watching the pedestrians on the walks, mostly the females in their bonnets and sweeping skirts. That Muldoon filly, for instance, was a well set-up female.

He heard the rumble of the A-1 pushcart in the corridor and knew it was noon. He knew that the Chief took his meals in his office at the other end of the building. He also knew that today Sergeant Mendoza was in court with a prisoner. He didn't know where Arne Tornquist might be. Davey Watson was on duty as jailer.

He heard Watson talking to someone. Al Christy, the blacksmith and owner of the stable, was saying, "Hoss stepped on Jody's foot. Got him at Doc Coogan's. I'll have to push this cart for him a day or so."

What rotten luck, Fenner thought. With Hec Ramsey out of town, Jody Brice would have been about as easy to handle as a piece of wet paper. Well, he was used to doing things the hard way. He wasn't

going to let this unexpected change get in his way.

"The kid hurt bad?" Davey Watson was asking. Fenner heard the jail keys jingled at Watson's belt.

"The damn kid never looks where he's goin'." Christy's voice rumbled like valley thunder, and as he loomed up at the cell door he looked big as the safe behind the desk at the Cherokee Hotel.

"Stand back from the door, Fenner," Davey Watson warned.

"Yes sir." Fenner backed up. As usual, Hart was complaining about the food they would have to eat. Simms was hunched on his cot staring moodily at the stone floor. Beckley, his back to them, had taken Fenner's place at the window and was staring out at the busy street.

"What do we have for grub today?" Fenner asked innocently. He could see damn well it was stew.

Davey Watson unlocked the cell door.

Suddenly Fenner pointed down the hall, yelling, "Rat big as a tomcat, by God!"

Davey Watson's young face showed surprise as he wheeled to have a look at a rat big as a tomcat. Christy wasn't fooled, but his cleverness didn't do him much good as a plate of steaming stew came slamming against his chin. He howled and did a war dance as some of the stew seeped through his shirt and down his pants. By the time Watson spun around, Fenner had slammed him so hard against the corridor wall that he slumped down, unconscious. The back of Watson's head was bloody.

"You hombres goin' to *set*?" Fenner yelled at his cell mates. "Or *run*!"

They came piling out of the cell. Fenner had grabbed Watson's gun and keys. As Watson regained consciousness, he tried to seize one of Fenner's ankles. Fenner kicked him in the chest.

As Simms reached the corridor, Christy forgot his own pain and wrapped huge arms around the outlaw. Simms screamed even louder than Christy had a minute before. At the same time, Christy extended his leg to trip Beckley. In an attempt to avoid the leg, Beckley crashed into the cart, overturning it. The floor of the jail cell was suddenly scummed with mulligan stew from the A-1 kitchen.

Beckley picked himself up and began to run. Hart was at his back. Fenner led the way, Watson's ring of keys in his hand. Simms was still yelling for them to come back and free him from the blacksmith's pinioning arms.

Remembering an alley door, Fenner swung that way. After two tries, he found the right key. The three of them roared out into the

noontime sun in a slot between buildings. From the jail came Christy's bellowing and Simms' pleas for mercy.

People on the street, sensing danger and hearing the commotion from the jail, began to run. Saving their own hides was all that seemed to interest them.

It was Beckley who had the misfortune to encounter Sergeant Mendoza, who was returning to the jail during the court's noon recess. Mendoza slammed the barrel of his gun into Beckley's right temple, pitching him headfirst into the alley dust. By the time Mendoza turned from his victim, the other two were gone. He started bounding after them, his dark face twisted with anger.

By this time, Fenner, brandishing Watson's revolver, was on the far walk, with Al Hart at his heels. Davey Watson appeared at the jail window. He still wore a dazed expression, but managed to fire the pistol he had snatched from the scalded blacksmith.

Hart went down yelling, a blood stain beginning to spread over his right pants leg. He rolled over and over, his red beard coated with dust.

By now women were screaming. They ran, herding children away from the violence.

Fenner, the only one left on his feet, ran through Wheeler's Dry Goods Store. Women were examining yard goods at several tables when the shooting had started. Now, as Fenner burst into the store, they stood frozen. One of them fainted.

O. B. Stamp bellowed orders from the police building doorway. Mendoza roared into the dry goods store, giving the ladies their second scare in a few seconds.

But Fenner was out the back door by then. He spotted two things—a saddled horse tied under a cottonwood behind O'Neal's Saddle Shop, and a young boy playing by himself behind Muldoon's Pharmacy.

Chapter Fifteen

Hec Ramsey's mind was filled with plans; with any luck, he and the Osage could spring the trap on the man who had so coldly murdered the Vandemeers. If this were Judge Parker's era, the killer's fate would be certain. With Judge Tate, however, he wasn't so sure. Not that he doubted the Judge's honesty on the bench, but involvement in land speculation with other influential men of the territory might temper his brand of justice.

Hec was thinking particularly of Ben Ritt. He didn't like the man. And aside from the rancher's pomposity, which Hec detested, he was not about to forget last night's backhand. He could still feel the sting of Ritt's fingers across his cheek whenever he thought about it.

Sooner or later, Hec vowed, Ritt would pay for the insult. Only the fact that Ritt's unstable son had been present had prevented Hec from flattening the rancher. He wasn't sure about young Ritt. Whatever his doubts, though, there was no sense in risking the son's life in a possible shoot-out because of the stupidity of the father.

Roy Fletcher had also been present. He wondered how much engineering background the geologist actually had. But whether or not the man was a fraud, he didn't deserve to be cut down by a possible stray bullet.

Hec had let Ritt get away with the backhand. It had not been worth the risk of human lives. Besides, Hec had learned something last night. Ben Ritt was nervous and much of his bluster was simply a cover-up.

There were a lot of loose ends that Hec hoped to find some sort of pattern in and tie together. He thought of Judge Tate again, recalling that Earl Enright had been about to reveal something when the Judge himself had barged into the land office. As soon as his plans were set in motion, Hec intended to ask the land agent what information he had concerning the Judge.

Hec was chewing this over in his mind at the outskirts of town when he heard the distant gunshot. The flat boom of the weapon in the quiet midday air was a chilling sound.

Some exuberant drunk, he told himself, getting rid of tensions by shooting off a pistol. Fool better be locked up before some passer-by was accidentally cut down, or some child was hurt. Random gunfire in a crowded town was a disgrace. O. B. Stamp, with his hell-fire eagerness for law and order, should see that the local ordinance was enforced.

Even as this crossed his mind, Hec knew it was pure fancy. In the handful of seconds between the gunshot and the muted screams and shouting that followed, he knew it was real trouble.

Touching the spurs, he put his horse to a hard run. As he swung from Wagon Street into Main, laying down a curtain of dust in his wake, he saw the crowd milling around the jail building. The yelling had spooked a team of skittish bays hitched to a buck-board. The driver, a gray-bearded man in overalls, was trying to haul them in.

“Runaway!” the driver shouted. Hec was barely able to swing his horse away from the careening wagon. Hec’s mount, not breaking stride, pounded on down the street toward the source of trouble.

In an instant, Hec absorbed the scene. Hart, whom he had used as a shield during the shootout at Weaver’s Landing, was down in the street. Blood on the outlaw’s pants leg indicated a thigh wound. Hart’s face was bone white, contorted with pain. The sight of Hec roaring up on the black horse caused him to cringe, as if he were afraid that this man with the formidable gun rep would shoot him. The heads of all the onlookers turned when Hec made a flying dismount. His heels hit the dust, throwing up a gout of pebbles.

Across the street, in front of the jail, O. B. Stamp, his badge pinned to the breast pocket of a business coat, was obviously dressing down a crestfallen Davey Watson. The young officer appeared to be injured; there was blood on his torn shirt.

From the dry goods store came a female wail. “She’s dead—*dead!*”

“Only fainted, ma’am!” It sounded like Sergeant Mendoza’s voice.

Stamp turned from shouting at Watson to yell something to Hec. In all the racket and confusion, it sounded like “Posse—organize—after him—”

Hec started to cross the street, then noticed a knot of people gathered in front of Muldoon’s Pharmacy. They were staring at a stricken Nora Muldoon in the doorway. Tears streamed down her face. A lock of hair had come unpinned and curled against a pale cheek.

Hec clamped a hand to his gun to keep it from spilling from its holster and started to run toward the pharmacy. A man caught Hec’s black horse and held it in.

At that moment, Stamp spotted Hec’s running figure and shouted, “And just where in hell were *you* when it happened?”

Ignoring the Chief, Hec shoved through the crowd around the pharmacy. Men fell back, some cursing until they saw who it was. Hec reached the sobbing Nora Muldoon.

“What *happened?*” He had to shake her by the shoulders to bring her out of her state of partial shock.

Her reddened eyes finally focused on his tight face. "Andy," she said dully. "He took Andy."

"Who?"

"That man—that terrible man!"

Stamp plunged through the crowd in time to hear the last words. "It was Jim Fenner! He broke jail!"

"And he's got the boy!" Hec turned cold. His language was not pretty. Nora Muldoon, in her grief, probably neither noticed nor cared. Stamp was pulling at Hec's sleeve, trying to get his attention. Hec turned back to the woman.

"Which way'd Fenner go?" he cried.

"West."

"What kind of horse?"

"Fairchild's roan ..."

"I'll get Fenner!" He gave her shoulders a final squeeze and wheeled around. Stamp's red face was close to his own. "How about Fenner's three friends?" Hec demanded. Stamp told him that Fenner was the only one still at large. Stamp clung to his arm with both hands.

"Listen to me, Ramsey ..."

"No time to listen!"

Stamp still clung to him. "We are organizing a legal posse. We are going to do this thing my way ..."

Hec pulled free, giving Stamp a look that whitened the man's lips. Stamp began to shout, but Hec was running for his horse. He would be eternally grateful to the man who had held the animal, whoever he was.

It took him a minute at most to follow the pointing fingers that directed him to the rear of the saddle shop. There, Herm Fairchild, an excited little man in bowler hat and dusty green suit, was yelling to someone about his stolen horse.

He spotted Hec riding up the alley toward him. "The hell with the horse! Get the boy, Ramsey!" Fairchild cried in a voice hoarse from shouting.

In a few terse sentences, he told how the Muldoon boy had been seized by Fenner. He finished by pointing out the direction Fenner had taken—west of town, where the flatlands gradually tilted toward a range of low hills topped by a ragged line of trees. Hec wasted no time in starting out.

Hec kept the gelding at a steady lope; no sense pushing the animal. Fenner evidently was pushing his, to judge from the spacing of the hoofprints. And Fenner's mount was carrying double. Even though

Andy Muldoon was far short of man-sized, any additional weight could wear an animal down fast. Fenner might not find it easy to cope with the boy. It seemed to Hec that the boy had his mother's spunk. She had come to this frontier town and, against long odds, was attempting to make a life for herself and her son. Yes, Andy would fight.

But not too much, boy, Hec prayed. Don't carry on till Fenner, in a rage, turns to violence ...

O. B. Stamp remained calm as he organized his twelve-man posse. He would deal with Hec Ramsey later. The posse included only one of his men, Sergeant Mendoza. Arne Tornquist was needed at the jail, and Davey Watson was in no condition for hard riding.

When Stamp had given the men their instructions and they were ready to ride, he took a minute to ride over to the rear door of the pharmacy. Nora Muldoon appeared at a window in answer to his shout.

"Don't fret, Mrs. Muldoon. There's only one way to do these things, and that's the right way. We'll get your son back." Then he added, more to himself than the woman, "If that fool Ramsey does anything to get the boy killed, I'll have his neck as well as his badge!"

Chapter Sixteen

Toward nightfall, as Hec had been hoping, Jim Fenner had to rest his horse. For some miles Hec had noticed that the hoofprints were erratic, no longer evenly spaced. Hec's gelding shot its ears forward as they started up a slope. Hec pulled his saddle gun, and kept the animal at a walk on grass that would deaden sounds of his approach.

As he made a fairly long sweep around a shoulder of hill, he saw them some distance away beside a rocky depression that had trapped rainwater.

Hec moved in closer, keeping his horse downwind. Fenner was sitting loose-legged on the ground, the reins in one hand. Now and then, he yanked on the reins to keep the horse from drinking too much and foundering.

Andy's voice was excited and quite deal. "Then what'd you do, Jim?"

"Do? Where?"

"You were tellin' me about Mexico."

"Oh yeah. Chihuahua City. Ciudad Chihuahua, they call it."

"Did you really see Victorio?"

"Yeah. Seen him killed. In '81, I think it was. My pa and my brothers and me, we was movin' cattle ..."

"Was he a bad Indian?"

"Maybe." Fenner was silent a moment. Andy stood directly in front of the seated man, facing him. If Hec tried to get a better angle on Fenner, the horse might pick up his scent. Fenner was saying, "Maybe like some folks claim I'm a bad white man." Fenner tossed a pebble into the little pool. It made a small splash. "I reckon Victorio just got tired of bein' chased to hell. He got his back bowed an' made a stand. They shot him to rags. Same as they'll likely do to me one day."

"But you're too smart for that," Andy protested. "The way you say you busted outa that jail ..."

Fenner's high-pitched laughter reached Hec. Hunched over,, rifle in hand, he moved swiftly through the high, concealing grass, careful to keep the wind right so that Fenner's horse would not whinny an alert.

Fenner was saying, "The only fella too smart is the one that don't get caught."

"I kind of like you, Jim. But now I think you better let me go. My mother will fret about me."

"She's a purty woman," Fenner mused.

"I don't mind walking back to town."

"A runt like you? In ten miles you'll walk right through your shoes."

"I go barefoot in summer. I can walk. You will let me go, won't you, Jim?"

"Kid, I once knew a smart gambler. He had some straps up his sleeve that'd hold a spare card. It was always an ace. Kid, that's what you are. My ace." Fenner started to get up. "Come on, let's ride."

"I thought you liked me, Jim. You talked about when you was—were—little like me." Nora's influence, Hec thought as he silently pared the yards between himself and Fenner.

"I do like you, kid," Fenner said. "I just like my own hide better."

"Where are you going to take me?" Andy's voice faltered.

"Mexico. Once we're across the line, you can start that long walk home." Fenner gave a nervous laugh. "Come on, kid," he said roughly, getting to his feet.

Hec worried about a ricocheting bullet hitting the boy. When Fenner started to grab the boy by the shoulder, Andy pulled away. It was the moment Hec had prayed for.

"Run, Andy!" he shouted. "*Run!*"

Hec's sudden shout spooked the stolen horse. It lunged, jerking the reins from Fenner's hand. Fenner fired twice in what he thought was Hec's direction. But Hec, keeping low, had spun away. He heard the vicious scythe of bullets through the grass behind him. He held his fire. The boy, instead of running away from the sound of Hec's voice, ran toward it. Fenner made a grab for him. Andy lost his balance and fell into the water. Fenner plunged after him, the water splashing high from his boots. The water was a little over ankle deep. Andy, still between Hec and Fenner, lost his footing on the slippery bottom and fell again.

As Fenner started to swing the boy up in front of him to use as a shield, Hec took a gamble. He fired at the part of Fenner's face not shielded by the boy's head.

Above the crash of the rifle, Andy cried out. With fright, not pain.

Fenner made no sound at all. He fell back into the shallow water that did not quite cover his body, and did not move.

Hec ran to the boy, who was struggling to get out of the water. The boy turned for a backward glance at his kidnaper.

"Don't look at him, Andy. Don't *look!*"

The boy obeyed. Hec knelt and held the small trembling body.

"I thought he liked me," Andy sobbed. "He told me stories and—and

I liked him. But he was going to take me ...”

Kill you eventually, when you were no longer any use to him, Hec wanted to say.

“Men like Fenner don’t give a hang for anybody in the world but themselves. Remember that, Andy. They’ll grin at you and tell you stories and all. But if it comes to them or you, it’s never them.”

By the time Hec caught up the two horses, the posse had arrived. And the water in the tank was stained red.

“There’s your prisoner, Chief.” Hec pointed at Fenner’s body in the water. “Sorry I had to kill him.”

Stamp mouthed something Hec thought was “law of the gun.”

The boy looked up at Stamp and said, “Hec Ramsey saved my life.”

“The boy’s safe,” put in Sergeant Mendoza. “Nothin’ else matters that I can see.”

Stamp took a deep breath and held it a moment. Then his mouth relaxed. “You’re right, Juan. Nothing else matters.”

Some time later, Hec delivered the boy to his grateful mother. She was too overcome to offer thanks. He didn’t expect any.

Chapter Seventeen

The next morning, Hec was able to put his plan into operation—the bear trap baited by himself and the Osage brave.

The town was already buzzing about the excitement of yesterday—the jailbreak, the kidnaping, the death of Jim Fenner. But when there was a rumor that the Vandemeer murders were about to be solved, the excitement became intense.

Sergeant Mendoza carried out his part of the plan. As he strolled along the main street, several people tried to stop and talk. He shrugged them off and continued on his way. In front of the A-1 Café, some older men on a loafers bench cornered him.

Because there was a good crowd around, Mendoza listened to their questions. But his answers were noncommittal.

A teamster named Billy Higgs pushed his hat back and demanded, “Why *can’t* you tell us who? The man’s goin’ to speak his piece in public, ain’t he?”

Mendoza nodded. “At a public trial, yeah. We don’t want him gettin’ shot up before that. You understand?”

Mendoza, having planted the seed, hurried away before they could question him further.

An hour later, Davey Watson, hat tipped at an odd angle because of a bandage on his head, paused beside a wagon being loaded by two workmen. They got to talking about a mysterious witness.

One of the workmen paused to wipe a sweaty face with a bandanna. “Hell, your witness must’ve said who done it by now.”

Davey Watson managed a mysterious smile despite his hurting head.

The second workman leaned on a barrel of flour. “Why don’t you arrest the killer?”

“Can’t arrest without we got the statement in evidence,” Watson said. “Don’t want the killer runnin’ off meanwhile.” He was questioned by several other men before he returned to the police building.

Hec Ramsey did his part in the plan. He made several stops along the street before he entered the land office. Earl Enright was behind his counter sorting through some file cards.

“Hello, Ramsey,” Enright greeted him. “Quite a day we had yesterday. Will Watson lose his job over it?”

"The Chief has simmered down. It wasn't Davey's fault. And if it was, he's learned his lesson. Fenner took a hell of a gamble. Paid off, too—for a while."

"I hear you killed him." Enright's sun-browned face split in a wide grin. "He was no match for your gun."

"I didn't particularly enjoy killin' him, Enright."

Enright's grin faded. "Didn't mean anything by it, Ramsey. I'm glad we've got a man like you in the department. I imagine Mrs. Muldoon is quite relieved to have her son back."

"That boy's got a lot of spunk." Hec watched Enright return the cards to the file cabinet and close the door.

"By the way, I hear there's a witness to the Vandemeer killings," Enright said.

"Was wondering when you'd get around to ask."

Enright looked puzzled. "Why would you say that?"

"Everybody else has been asking. Tell you why I came in to see you. The Judge came roaring in here just as you were starting to tell me something about him."

Enright frowned, as if in deep thought. "Oh, yes. I was about to mention that he had been involved in land speculation at one time. Deeper than a lot of men."

"That doesn't really prove anything, Enright."

Hec noticed that today the man was wearing a wool shirt, riding pants, and high laced boots. Hec suppressed a yawn. "Didn't get much sleep," he apologized, starting for the door.

"Is there really a witness, Ramsey?"

"A lot of folks will be surprised when they hear his name." With a smile, Hec walked out and closed the door. He glanced back into the land office and saw Enright standing rigid behind the counter. Then, suddenly, Enright grabbed his hat and left by a rear door. He was on his way to help spread the word.

At the police building, Oliver Stamp cornered Hec. "How's it going?"

"I've got people telling *me* about the witness now," Hec said. "The killer knows about it by now. Or soon will."

Stamp shook his head. "I don't know if we're being so smart. More I think about it ..."

"I thought we already did the thinking."

"Damn it, Ramsey, we're *asking* somebody to take a shot at you and that Osage. At a time and place of his own choosing!"

"Not exactly," Hec corrected. "The time and place'll have to be

somewhere along the trail back from the reservation.”

“That’s a lot of trail.”

“You think I like it? You got some better way, *sir*, I’ll grab it with both hands.”

Stamp pulled at an ear lobe. “I hate to see you take the risk.” But Hec didn’t hear him. He was already gone.

As Hec crossed the street, Nora Muldoon called to him from the doorway of her pharmacy. “Hec, I want to thank you for bringing Andy home safely.”

Hec smiled and doffed his hat. “He’ll have a lot to tell his new friends.”

She frowned. “There’s something else. This talk of a witness to the Vandemeer killings. Who is it, Hec?”

“Can’t give the name of the witness, Nora. I’m sorry.”

“I meant who is the killer?” When he just looked at her, she reddened. “But the witness must’ve told *you* who the killer is.”

“Can’t arrest him on that say-so,” Hec told her. “Have to have face-to-face identification.”

She looked worried. “But the killer knows the danger he’s in. He’ll probably follow you.”

“I can’t help that. I’ll be careful about it.” He placed a knuckle under her chin. “Hey look, it’s nothing to worry about.”

“Why not?”

“Well, ’cause I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time now.”

“Taking care of nobody but *yourself* is easy!” She hurried back into the pharmacy, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. Hec gave an understanding smile and shook his head.

For the rest of that day, the town was alive with gossip concerning the identity of the mysterious witness. Who was he? Or she?

At dawn the next day, Hec ate a quick breakfast at the café, then hurried to the stable for his horse. As he rode out of the livery barn, he saw Sergeant Mendoza, Arne Tornquist, and three saddled horses in front of the police building. Both officers were checking their rifles and revolvers when Hec rode over. At that moment, Oliver Stamp stepped from the police building.

“What’s this all about?” Hec asked the Chief narrowly.

“Your plans were to leave at this time in the morning. So we’re going with you.”

“What?” Hec was incredulous.

“I’ve decided that this stunt of yours is just too dangerous.”

Hec began to boil. “Don’t you think you should’ve let me in on this

decision, sir?"

"It's my responsibility, not yours," Stamp said in a flat voice.

Hec swung down and tied his horse to the rail.

Stamp stared at him. "Aren't you ready to ride?"

"All I'm ready for's a private talk, Chief, sir! And if you're not ready for that, I'm about ready to cash this job in right now!"

Hec didn't wait for an answer. He stormed into the police building, slamming the door at his back. In the room that had been set aside for his laboratory, he dragged his trunk from under a big table. He began sorting out its contents, ready to pack.

Stamp, obviously trying to hold himself in, entered the room and stood watching him a moment. "What're you doing, Ramsey?"

"Packing."

"Look, Ramsey, I told you when you got here ..."

Hec straightened up. A bar of sunlight streaming through a side window fell across his angry face. "Hell yes, you're good at tellin'! That's fine for schoolteachers, mister, but a man with your job oughta teach *himself* to listen a little!"

"*You're* one to talk, Mr. U.S. Deputy Marshal!" Stamp was losing control. "You've been shoving your experience down my throat from the first day you got off that coach!"

"Yeah, and ain't it a shame you're not weaned yet?"

Stamp's lips were white. "You through?"

"Pretty near!" Hec leaned close. "Now how in hell're you going to flush that killer if you send an army out to escort the Indian?" Stamp looked surprised. Hec drove home his point. "It's one thing asking a killer to show his hand. You're asking him to commit suicide."

"I'm trying to protect an innocent man's life. That's what I'm doing! Our Indian friend is not a lone, daredevil U.S. marshal like you used to be." Stamp ground his teeth. "He's a man with a family who's let himself be talked into playing your game. I won't *trade* his life to catch a killer, Ramsey. Can you understand that?"

"I understand that you think I would," Hec said quietly. "You better call this whole thing off. It won't work. You'll just make a fool of the Indian and yourselves."

Stamp seemed torn. "Why are you so damned bullheaded?"

"You know what I said is true, At least my way, the killer would think he's got a chance to hit and run." Hec paused, then added, "I'm betting he'll take that chance."

"You're *betting* too much!"

Hec eyed him. "Good enough. Then you go make your best play

without me.”

Stamp fumed as Hec turned back to the trunk to resume his packing. Gradually the Chief's face changed, and in a quiet voice said, “You'd really quit on me now?”

Hec looked up. “Seems like you're the one who quit on me.”

For a moment the only sound was the chiming of a clock deeper in the building as the hour was struck.

Stamp clenched his hands into fists and made what was obviously a hard choice. “All right.” He met Hec's eyes. “All right, we'll chance it.”

Hec studied him, then allowed a flat smile to cross his lips. “Cheer up, *sir*. One way or another, when this is over, you'll be rid of me.”

Stamp started to speak, but Hec had slammed shut the lid of his trunk and walked out. It took Stamp a moment to recover, then he followed Hec out to the front of the police building, where Mendoza and Tornquist were still waiting beside the horses. The two officers mounted up.

Hec swung aboard his own horse, turned the animal, and sat looking evenly down at Stamp. The Chief jerked his head at Sergeant Mendoza and Tornquist. “Climb off your horses,” he ordered.

Tornquist looked surprised, but he knew enough not to voice it. Mendoza gave Stamp a puzzled look. “I don't figure this, Chief ...”

“Ramsey's going to do it alone,” Stamp said grudgingly. He jerked his head at the two officers. “Come along.”

As Hec swung his horse away from the hitching post, the Sergeant and Tornquist followed Stamp into the police building.

From a window, Stamp watched Hec start out of town, wondering if he had done the right thing. Ramsey would be safe enough *going*. The killer didn't know where he was going. It was coming back that would bring the real danger.

Once Hec Ramsey met up with the Osage, it would be open season on both of them.

Chapter Eighteen

Roy Fletcher was leaning on the bar in the Big Creek Saloon early that morning. With a forefinger he absently traced imaginary drilling angles in the dampness left by his glass on the bar top. His dark face was scowling. On his shirt sleeve was a trace of grease, not oil. It almost made him grin. The closest thing to oil on any of the holes he'd drilled for Ben Ritt was the grease used to lubricate the machinery.

He finished his drink and stared at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. He saw in his reflection a man only slightly over thirty but already burdened with frustrations. The lines at the corners of his mouth had deepened. No wonder. Working for a man like Ben Ritt was like trying to roll a barrel of rocks up a steep hill. Every time you stepped forward, the weight of the rocks pushed you back.

He swore under his breath, and the bald bartender, whittling shavings from a bar of soap into a sink, looked up. "This time in the mornin' whiskey always tastes worse'n this soap," he grinned in sympathy.

"Tastes the same as it did seven o'clock last night." Fletcher downed another shot and set the glass beside the half-filled bottle on the bar. He'd arrived in town last evening and, after hearing the rumors about a "mystery" witness, had decided to stay around for developments.

Nobody seemed to know much about the witness, only that there was one who would tell his story in court. The Vandemeers were to be avenged, it seemed.

Fletcher had drunk, listened to the talk. He had gotten into an all-night poker game, won a little and lost it. Now, this morning, he was forty dollars out after all that sweating over cards.

It was forty dollars he couldn't afford to lose. Ben Ritt owed him a month's salary. How many times had Fletcher tried to point out to the cattleman that drilling for oil was a much bigger gamble than risking it all in a poker game? Ritt seemed to think all a man had to do was make a few calculations, put marks on a map, and start drilling. Fletcher had tried to point out that if it was as simple as that he, Fletcher, would be rich as the nabobs who had hit it in Tulsa. But dry hole after dry hole had shredded Ben Ritt's patience.

Ritt began to blame everyone for his misfortune, even his own son. If it had been up to Steve, Fletcher would have quit long ago. Steve was a whiner, and no wonder. Ritt had untied the purse strings and given him everything he ever asked for. For instance, when Steve was

twelve, the old man had presented him with a silver-mounted saddle. Just because the kid had seen one during a visit to Mesilla and wanted one just like it.

Fletcher poured himself another drink, his laughter sour. Ritt was so damned set on having his son escape the hardships of forty dollars a month and now he found that what little backbone the kid had possessed at birth had been drained away. And Ben Ritt was going broke in his attempt to fight off the incursion of the automobile into the horse business at the same time as he was trying to hit it lucky with an oil strike.

The bartender said tensely, "There goes Ramsey. Wonder if he's ridin' to fetch that *witness*."

Fletcher wheeled around, following the bartender's pointing finger. Through a dirty front window he could see Hec Ramsey mounted on a black horse, his saddle gun brushing his right knee, heading out of town.

The sight of the ex-Marshall turned Fletcher cold. He heard how Ramsey had gunned down Jim Fenner when Fenner already had his gun out and was trying to use the Muldoon boy as a shield. The boy had told it all last night, after Ramsey had ridden him home.

Fletcher walked through the deserted deal tables over to the window, glass in hand. He stared at Ramsey as long as he could until the ex-Marshall was out of sight.

One thing Fletcher had not counted on in this deal was cold-blooded murder. He knew full well it could happen when the stakes were high. At a time like that, men didn't give a damn for the life of anyone who might try and crowd them.

At other times when such a situation developed, Fletcher had always been able to turn his back and pretend he had seen nothing, heard nothing. Sometimes political favors were exchanged, and the guilty were never brought to trial. If there was too much of a public clamor, then there might be a scapegoat, some saddle bum who happened to be around at the time.

Fletcher felt his throat. He had once witnessed a hanging at Piute Rock, and it had not been a pretty sight. Ramsey had been marshal there then.

Thinking of it put a chill down his spine. He drained his glass, and the whiskey partially warmed him. Damned if he'd be a scapegoat, he vowed. He was not about to be run down if the local bigwigs started a stampede when Ramsey brought in his witness. Too many men were out to grab any parcel of land where there might be oil. Fletcher knew very well who the people were, some of them prominent citizens of the town, who were gambling on a drilling rig that would bring in a

gusher. Betting their lives, some of them.

That morning Roy Fletcher vowed to protect himself, no matter whose blood might be spilled. Even Hec Ramsey's, if it came to that.

Returning to the bar, Fletcher paid his bill with a gold piece, pulled his hat low, and walked down to the livery barn for his horse.

Chapter Nineteen

Oliver Stamp went to the room he had assigned Hec Ramsey and stared at the small trunk. Hec had not locked it. Stamp pulled back the lid and stared at the trays of crime-detection materials assembled by the ex-Marshall over the years. Yesterday Hec Ramsey had ignored his orders to wait for the posse. But then, Stamp conceded, Ramsey had probably not even heard the order. He had been hell bent to recover the boy before Fenner could turn savage and kill or wound.

Aside from the safety of the boy, Ramsey was motivated by his feelings for Nora Muldoon. A strange man, that Ramsey. Yesterday, in his rage at being disobeyed, Stamp had almost dressed him down in front of the posse on the subject of the law of the gun versus that of the court. Mendoza had cut him off in that mild way of his by saying that all that counted was the boy's safety.

Mendoza had been right, of course.

Now that he thought about it logically, Stamp had to admit that Ramsey had been lucky to down Jim Fenner. Fenner, a likable cuss when he wanted to be but pure poison if crossed, had built a gun rep for himself in the territory.

How much pure poison would Ramsey and the Indian run into today? Who had murdered the Vandemeers, and why? It was someone desperate, that was for sure. One murder or ten, it was the same hangman, the same rope ...

Out at his ranch, Ben Ritt was thinking along similar lines. He was in a corner of the rambling frame ranch house that he reserved for his office. He was slumped in a swivel chair, the tip of a black pen between his teeth. He stared out at the pasture, where some of his most valuable studs were grazing. The fence needed whitewashing. The whole place was in a state of disrepair. A man couldn't spend his money on dry holes in the ground and keep up his property too.

The day he had come back on the stage, Ritt had gone over to Quincy to try and arrange for additional funds from the bank. The banker, Sam Grossman, would loan money on horses, even cattle. But oil, no.

"Bring me a bucket full of oil, Ben," Grossman had told his old friend. "Let me wade in it, wash my hands in it. Then we'll talk about loans. But I can't put out the bank's money on geological surveys made by a man I never even heard of."

"Roy Fletcher has a fine reputation," Ritt had said defensively.

"He tell you himself, Ben?" the banker asked dryly.

"My son Steve knew him when he was working for a big oil company over East."

"Ben, you've come up from nothing, same as me. You know cows and horses, and land. Every man to his own game, I say. Oil's not yours."

Ritt had been enraged. "I'll find oil if it kills me."

"Or somebody else?" the banker asked softly.

Ritt had stormed out of the bank.

Now, slumped at his desk, he recalled Sam Grossman's words. Death had bloodied Ben Ritt's trail since then, for sure. He didn't like to think about the Vandemeers, but he had to face up to it.

Last night, one of his men had brought word from town about Ramsey killing Jim Fenner. This part of it he could secretly applaud. Any man who would kidnap a child needed worse than a bullet in the head.

It was the rest of it that chilled Ritt. His man had said that a secret witness had been found. Someone had been present when the Vandemeers were gunned down.

With a shaking hand, Ben Ritt jerked open a drawer in his desk. He removed a .44 revolver, checked the loads, and shoved it into his belt.

He got to his feet; his legs trembled until he braced them. He'd faced worse than this, he reminded himself. A pair of illiterate homesteaders were not worth the stone that had gone into the markers over their graves.

Ramsey was a fool to concern himself with the Vandemeers. There was much bigger game if he wanted to go after it. Land fraud might not be equated with murder, but it brought as much heartache to the survivors.

He knew who to blame for the fiasco of drilling sites: one Roy Fletcher, self-styled geologist. Poor Steve had been taken in by the man.

Ritt stepped out to the yard. His son was just saddling a bay horse. "Where you figure to go, son?"

Steve Ritt would not meet his father's eyes. "Gal I want to see, over by Osage Ridge."

As Ritt stared at his son, something clicked in his mind. Pieces began to fit. Secret witness. Ritt had seen Hec Ramsey near the Osage reservation. Who was the secret witness? That damned Ride-the-Sun or whatever in hell his name was. Of course, he'd taken supper with the Vandemeers, Ritt remembered hearing.

"Pa, why you wearin' a gun?" Steve nodded at the weapon at his

father's belt.

"You ever shoot off the head of a snake?"

"Rattler, sure."

"Well, there's all kinds of snakes, boy. Some have red skins."

Steve looked puzzled, then got it. "You mean red men, Indians?"

"The Osage in particular. They've never liked me worth a damn. No more'n I ever liked them."

"You kicked 'em off the place. Took a rope end to one of 'em, I recollect. What you gettin' at, Pa?"

"No goddamned redskin is goin' to get his revenge by pointin' a finger at me. Or at you!"

Steve Ritt looked away, tightening the cinch on the bay.

"Steve, you ride over and see that gal of yours. You stay the day."

"You figurin' to do somethin' with that there pistol. What?"

"Just do what I told you." He yelled at one of his men to rope out a saddle horse. Then he turned, looking up at Steve. "You seen Fletcher?"

"Not since last night. He went to town. He was sure riled up about somethin'."

"Yeah." Secret witness, Ritt thought. That was what had riled up Roy Fletcher. No Osage breathing God's air had brains enough to work a whipsaw like this Vandemeer thing by himself. He had to have a white man's help. That white man would be Roy Fletcher, geologist. With Ben Ritt dead and Steve hounded out of the country, Roy Fletcher could ride in and take over. Fletcher had expressed an interest in ranching; more stability than the oil business, he'd once said.

"Why in hell didn't I think of that before?" Ritt did not realize he had spoken aloud until the man leading up his saddled horse looked at him in surprise.

Ben Ritt mounted up. Already he could see his son cantering across the grassy flats on his way to see his girl. Steve was a little too wild, Ritt thought. Too many girls, too much whiskey. Well, Steve would straighten out. One day, Ritt told himself, he would select a decent girl from a fine family and more or less make a present of her. Just as he had once ordered a fancy silvered saddle for Steve when the boy was twelve or so. When Steve was settled down and married, then Ritt could ease back and let the new generation run things.

His faint good humor didn't last very long. By the time he had left his own ranch, he was thinking of what lay ahead. If Hec Ramsey hadn't come to this part of the territory, he would have played his cards close to the vest. But Ramsey's presence was something to worry

a man.

Ben Ritt, saddle gun in a boot, turned his horse toward the Osage reservation. He didn't know it then, but he was too late.

Chapter Twenty

About that same time, Hec Ramsey was riding down the long slope toward the Indian encampment. Children stared at him wide-eyed as he entered the campgrounds. It was much the same as before, only today a younger man was tending the goats. The usual collection of dogs either sniffed or barked or both. Squaws were working in a cornfield. Some young braves were running mustangs in a far patch of grass.

Rides-with-the-Sun was standing in front of his tent, waiting for him. "I think maybe you have changed your mind," the Osage said, pointing at the sun.

"Wanted to be sure we had good light for the ride back. Shadows breed ambushers."

"Do we have enough bait for our wolf trap?"

"The two of us, that's plenty of bait." Hec's tight grin matched the Osage's.

One of the squaws led up a blanketed mustang, and the Osage swung lightly aboard. He and Hec started riding out of the camp. Hec eased his revolver in its holster and his saddle gun in the boot.

After a mile, when they were deep in the willows, the Osage asked, "How long do you think it will be before our killer shows himself?"

Hec shrugged. "One thing for sure, we'll never make it to town without him showing himself."

"Who do you think murdered the Vandemeers?"

"Toss a coin. Could be any number of people."

"Ben Ritt?"

Something in the Indian's voice caused Hec to turn in the saddle to stare. "Your voice says you don't like him."

"I have his rope scars on my back." The Osage rode straight-backed on the blanketed horse. There was a faint and bitter twist to his lips.

Hec could hardly blame him. A lot of the Osage's brethren bore the white man's scars, rope or otherwise.

It was a fair morning with only a few dumpling clouds frothy and white on the horizon. A cow with Ben Ritt's BR brand on its flank broke from a thicket and ambled off into the trees. Hec deliberately kept the pace slow. It was a ride not meant to get them anywhere. The worst thing that could happen would be that they would ride into town alone.

Well, next to the worst, maybe.

"I hope that whoever he is," said the Osage, "he has the courage to come at us from the front, and not shoot us in the back."

"What do you expect from a man who'd murder a husband and wife?"

"No compassion."

"You've had education. Where?"

"Mission school. Not long enough. But I learned to read. I have books."

"I guess we re agreed on one thing. Neither one of us cares much for Ben Ritt."

The Osage cocked his head. "You hear something, Ramsey?"

Hec listened. Years on the frontier had made his hearing sensitive. His life had often depended on it. But even trained as he was, he heard nothing, only the sighing of the wind through the tall trees that bordered the trail.

Then, after a few moments of intense listening, Hec heard the sound that had alerted the Osage. It was a horse at a hard run over caprock. The steel shoes made a clicking sound in the stillness. From the sound of it, the animal was closing on them fast.

Hec gave a signal, and he and the Osage spun their horses apart, the Indian on one side of the trail, Hec on the other.

Then came the crack of a rifle. Suddenly the hoof-beats were stilled. For perhaps five minutes, Hec and the Osage waited, their nerves taut.

"I'll go have a look," Hec finally said in a low voice. "How about you staying here? Keep anybody from riding down my back."

"No one will." The Osage patted the barrel of the rifle he gripped in his two hands. His dark eyes glittered as Hec started back down the trail.

Hec came to a promontory and looked down. He saw a dead horse down in a canyon. A bareheaded man, holding a rifle in one hand, was limping away from the horse. He was a chunky, dark man, Hec saw when the man looked back over his shoulder.

It was Roy Fletcher. He saw Hec and stiffened.

"Who shot at you?" Hec yelled down to him.

"Ben Ritt. His son killed my horse. Then he heard somebody coming and ran away. If he'd known it was you, maybe he'd have stayed to try for a lucky shot."

"But he didn't."

"He hates your guts."

Hec nodded. "Probably. He must hate yours, to shoot a horse out

from under.”

“He wasn’t aiming for the horse.”

“What were you doing out here, Fletcher? Looking for a witness?”

The geologist sat down on a rock. He had either a sprained ankle or a bruised leg, suffered when the horse spilled him. “That’s exactly the reason I came out,” Fletcher admitted. “If anybody’s trying to build a noose for that Vandemeer thing, I figure to make damned sure it doesn’t fit me.”

“You denying you killed them?”

Fletcher glared. “Hell yes, I deny it. Do *you* think I did?”

“You among others.” Hec turned his horse. “You make a try for me with that rifle, you’re a dead man.”

“Think I’m a fool?”

Hec didn’t answer. “Who do *you* think killed the Vandemeers?” he asked.

“Ben Ritt, who else? He probably thought I was you. We’re about the same size. You better cover your back, Ramsey. He’ll try for you and that damned Indian next.”

“How do you know about the Indian?”

“When I was layin’ on the ground, Ritt came up, babbling about an Osage. He was maybe figurin’ to shoot me in the head. Then he heard your horse and high-tailed it.”

“Ben Ritt, huh? Hmmm. Maybe.” Hec rode down the slope. He leaned over, snatched Fletcher’s rifle, and unloaded it. He dropped the shells in his saddlebag and threw the rifle far up the canyon. “Just in case, Mr. Geologist,” Hec said thinly. Then he rode back to where the Osage was waiting for him.

In town that morning, Nora Muldoon dusted her glass containers, rearranged her display window, and waited on customers. One wanted a potion for a headache and the other something to put on a boy’s stubbed toe. She advised the mother of the boy to make sure there were no signs of blood poisoning. If there was the slightest suspicion, she should take him to Doc Coogan.

What hazards there were on the frontier for young boys! Thinking of the kidnapping of her own son, she shuddered. It had come as something of a shock to have the boy tell her that at first he had been thrilled by the excitement of the episode. The boy’s apparent lack of fear worried her. He had known right off that Jim Fenner had been the bandit leader of the stage holdup, but Andy had misunderstood, attributing Robin Hood qualities to the man. When Fenner had swept him up from the ground, set him on the saddle in front of him, and

said, "Kid, let's have us a ride," Andy had been delighted to be riding with a real outlaw.

At first, in the hope that if he kept the boy interested he wouldn't be any problem later, Fenner had told him stories of daring exploits. It wasn't until later that Andy had realized Fenner's true intent—to use him as a shield if Hec Ramsey or anyone else caught up with them. Young as he was, Andy had seen quite a bit of life and he was prepared when Fenner's true nature began to assert itself.

Before the kidnaping, Andy hadn't been able to make any friends in the big tent school at the edge of town. But since the business with Fenner, he was a hero to the other boys. And to the girls, too, she supposed. She only hoped it wouldn't go to his head. She would have much preferred his making friends on his own rather than not having it spurred by the exploits of Jim Fenner, who had finally been gunned down by the famous—or infamous, depending on how one looked at him—Hec Ramsey.

She didn't quite know what to make of Hec herself. He could be kind and gentle, but he could also kill a man. Kill a man to save a boy. Her doubts began to fade. Yes, she must never forget that Hec Ramsey had taken Jim Fenner's life so that Andy could live. She tried hard to push from her mind the fact that today Hec was again playing some dangerous game.

She heard someone enter the pharmacy. It was Doc Coogan, in a state of such excitement that he had forgotten to remove his barber's apron. In one pocket she could see the folded handle of a straight-edged razor. The incongruities of this town, she thought. A medical doctor who could also shave and cut the hair of his patients.

"Good morning, Doc," she said in her usual cheery voice.

Calming down a bit, Coogan gave Nora a list of drugs he would need. "We got to be prepared for all eventualities."

She looked at the list with faint surprise. "What eventualities?" Even then she secretly knew what he was getting at. Her heart pounded with fear. "You expect trouble," she heard herself say.

"With gunshot wounds it's always best to be ready," Coogan said. "'Course, with Jim Fenner there weren't no need. They brought him in dead."

She did not share Coogan's frontier humor. Chuckling, Coogan waited for her to get over her shock and start getting together the things on his list.

Through the front window, she could see people hurrying on the walks in the bright mid-morning sunlight. A wagonload of bricks rumbled by. A man with a feather in the band of a battered derby hat was trying to hawk silk goods from the back of a wagon. On this warm

day, it was hard to equate such activity with the cold hand of death. She shuddered and picked up a pestle.

Chapter Twenty-One

Hec Ramsey drew up his horse on a hump of brushy ground. "If somebody's got an eye on us, this will be a good place for him to try a shot," he said quietly.

The Osage nodded. "If we don't have trouble here, we will down there." He pointed to a narrow canyon below. The trail they were following twisted across caprock for a space and then over sparse grass. High boulders and rock outcroppings lined the trail on the right. To the left was a growth of tall trees, willows mostly, where a creek meandered and then spilled across trail through a narrow slot in rock.

Hec unscrewed the cap of his canteen. He passed it to the Osage. "You have a drink. I'll keep my eyes peeled."

"I'm not thirsty."

"Lifting the canteen might make our killer think we're unconcerned. If he makes a move I'll get him."

"All right." The Osage drank deeply from the canteen, or pretended to. Then he passed it back to Hec. "You drink. I will keep watch."

Hec drank, the water tasting sweet and cool. He screwed the cap back on the canteen, feeling a slight disappointment. It had been a good spot for the killer to try for them, but he still hadn't made an attempt on their lives.

"Here we sit," Hec muttered. "He couldn't ask for a better target." But Hec had to admit that while the distance between cover and where they sat would be close for a marksman with a rifle, it was long range for a pistol. And the ambusher who had put a bullet slice across his ribs had used a revolver, not a long gun. Hec put a hand to his wound, as if to remind himself of the impermanence of life.

"He'll never let us reach town," the Osage said.

"How much farther you reckon we have to go?"

"Five miles."

"I don't like the looks of that canyon below," Hec said thinly.

"We agreed that this is the best trail. We want to give our killer every advantage." The Osage's smile was bitter.

"I hope we can take him alive. That was a brutal murder."

"Just so he pays for what he did to my friends."

"He'll pay," Hec promised, "one way or another."

A dry wind came up as they started down the long slope that would take them into the canyon itself. Treetops stirred in the wind, but

forest on one side and high rock walls on the other kept the canyon air fairly still. From the high ground, Hec could see where the trail twisted off through the rocks, making a large S. But when they reached the canyon floor, he could no longer see more than twenty yards ahead.

What strange hunters we are, Hec thought grimly. Using ourselves as bait. Giving our prey the first shot.

After half a mile, he began to think that the Osage had erred in picking this new trail. Hec had not been over it before, but the Indian had claimed that it would give a potential ambusher the best opportunity. Nothing had happened so far, unless you counted the shooting of Roy Fletcher's horse.

Some of the tension went out of his shoulders as he thought of the geologist and Ben Ritt. But he quickly put the thoughts from his mind. Hec knew too well that it could be fatal to ease off by thinking of what had happened earlier. It dulled the brain to what lay ahead.

Suddenly something whistled past his nose, followed almost instantly by the distant crack of a high-powered rifle. It came from the right of the trail.

"In the rocks ahead!" Hec shouted. As he and the Osage spurred apart, a second rifle shot cut loose, this time from the trees to their left.

"My horse!" yelled the Osage as he tried to fight the rearing animal. As Hec swung his own mount to try and assist the Osage, he felt something tug at the crown of his hat, followed by another sharp explosion from a rifle. Another inch and I'd have no brains, he realized with a shudder.

He knew they were in trouble. The Indian's mustang, on its hind legs and whinnying, had been badly hit. As the Osage gathered himself for a dismount, the horse suddenly crashed to the canyon floor.

Only instinct saved the Indian from being crushed under the horse. He rolled aside, and the horse, dead before it struck the rocks, missed him by inches. Somehow he had managed to retain his grip on the rifle. Making a ball of himself to present a minimum of target, he took refuge behind the body of the dead animal.

In a flash, Hec had kicked free of the stirrups and leaped to the ground. Hec's riderless black horse wheeled and went back down the trail, stirrups flapping.

A burst of rifle fire raked their refuge. So far, the dead horse had absorbed any bullets that hadn't ricocheted off rocks or cut furrows through the ground.

“Let’s move!” Hec shouted, swinging an arm to indicate a knot of man-sized boulders interspersed with brush. He was already scrabbling across the canyon floor. Behind him came the Osage at a bounding run. More shots sought them and missed.

Sheer instinct, the ability to move without thinking, had saved them so far. It was an ability that came from long experience. Hec, breathing hard as he crouched behind the rocks, was glad he had the Osage as a companion and not some amateur. An amateur would now be dead on the canyon floor instead of the Indian mustang.

“Two ambushers,” the Osage said tensely in Hec’s ear. There was a lull in the firing. A distant shout reached them, but Hec could not make out the voice.

He caught the Osage by an arm and pointed at the rocks above. “We gotta clear out of here. They can circle in and jump us.”

Rides-with-the-Sun nodded. “I’ll move in on the one in the trees,” he said pointing to the left. “I broke that horse myself. He was a good animal. Our killer friend will pay for that along with the rest.” He spoke with vehemence.

“I’m going after the one in the rocks.” Hec began to belly along a slot between the boulders. He wanted to reach the one who had cut down on them from the right side of the trail. Already buzzards, drawn by the dead horse, had begun to circle in the clear sky. A few dark clouds, blown by the wind, momentarily obscured the sun. Then it burned brightly again, seemingly with a new intensity.

Upon reaching a rock shelf, Hec straightened up and began to move in an erratic run toward the spot where the rifleman had been holed up. Hec wondered if he was still there.

He didn’t have to wonder. A shot slammed into the ground where he had been an instant before. Another whipped into one of the high boulders near his head and screamed off in an eerie ricochet.

Continuing his zig-zag run for another dozen yards, Hec suddenly flung himself flat. He sent three shots into the brush dead ahead. There was a yell, a sound of movement, then the sounds diminished.

Hec came to his knees, his rifle at the ready. No one appeared in the area he guessed to be the ambusher’s position. There was sporadic rifle fire from the trees to the left.

He risked a glance below and saw the Osage just vanishing into the trees.

A new sound reached him—there were several more horses hidden among the trees. The ambusher had friends.

For a moment Hec feared for the Osage’s life. Then, over a rise of ground where the trees were sparse, he saw Oliver Stamp appear.

With the Chief were Juan Mendoza and Arne Tornquist. Hec didn't have time to be annoyed with Stamp for the interference. In fact, he was grateful for it. At least the Osage, on his side of the canyon, would have allies.

Hec stood upright, waving his rifle, shouting to gain the Indian's attention. The Osage wheeled from behind a tree trunk to stare up at Hec in the rocks.

"Hold your fire—Stamp! The Chief!"

The Osage glanced up through the trees and apparently saw the three officers. He signaled that he understood.

Only a handful of seconds had elapsed since Hec glimpsed Stamp and the other two, but even a second lost could be fatal. Hec was reminded of his own danger when the man ahead suddenly cut loose again. Hec felt a sting of rock splinters against the back of his hand as one of the bullets again came dangerously close.

He emptied his rifle, dropped to one knee, and quickly reloaded.

A horseman suddenly loomed ahead, riding away from, not toward, Hec. He couldn't make out who it was. The man vanished down a long slot between rocks that bisected the canyon. Leaping to a high, flat rock, Hec scanned the slot with his eyes. It made a long sweeping S, then doubled back to rejoin the main canyon a half mile or so ahead.

Without giving a thought to his own danger, Hec made a bounding run across open country to a place where the trail made one of its sharp curves. Because of a litter of fair-sized boulders in the defile below, the rider had been forced to slow his horse. He was bent over in the saddle so that Hec could not see his face.

Hec gauged the distance below and the speed of the rider. He could see that the trail ahead was cleared of the boulders that had impeded the horseman's speed thus far. Once he reached that point, he could spur the animal to a dead run. Stamp and the two officers and the Osage were too far away now to head him off.

Hec leaped, letting his rifle slip from his hands. He came down hard on the back of the surprised rider. Even as his arms encircled the man's upper body, he still had no idea of his identity. Only that he wore high laced boots.

Something clicked in Hec's mind. But he couldn't dwell on it, for his crushing weight had not only surprised the rider but had thrown the horse off stride. With a whinny of surprise, it stumbled. Its forelegs collapsed, and the animal went into a long, rolling fall. Hec kept his grip on the rider. They crashed together on the hard ground. Hec heard a whoosh of breath from the man, saw the horse clamber to its feet and break into a stumbling run.

Hec released the man and drew his pistol. The man in the laced boots lay face down, gasping for breath. Hec didn't have to turn him over to know who he was.

"Hello, Enright," he said in a tight voice.

The land agent squirmed to his knees and made a dive for the rifle he had dropped when Hec had slammed into him.

"You even breathe deep and you're dead, Enright!"

There was death in Hec Ramsey's voice, and Enright heard it. He allowed his body to sink back to the ground far short of the rifle he had been so desperately trying to reach.

Enright was breathing heavily. "Let me explain, Ramsey ..."

Hec patted the man's belt, his shirt. Frowning, he asked, "Where's your handgun?"

"Don't even own one," the land agent said in a voice hoarse with fear.

"Don't *own* one?" Hec felt a slight disappointment, remembering that the Vandemeers had been murdered with a pistol. Of course, Enright could be lying, in fact probably was.

"Put your hands behind your back," Hec ordered, drawing a pair of manacles from his belt.

Enright's face was white. "Let me tell you the whole story, damn it!"

"Time enough for that later! The sight of you turns my stomach. Now do what I told you!"

Hec had just snapped the handcuffs on Enright's wrists when Stamp and his men, followed by a prisoner on a bay horse, came clattering along the draw. In the rear was the Osage, on Hec's black horse.

Stamp drew rein, staring at Enright. "So you're Ambusher Number Two," the Chief breathed.

Hec leaned around Stamp's horse to see the Chief's prisoner. It was Steve Ritt. He was bareheaded, his clothing torn from brush. A scratch along one cheek was bleeding into his shirt collar. He was even paler than Enright, if that was possible. His wrists were handcuffed behind his back, and Sergeant Mendoza, his face tight with fury, was holding the reins of his horse.

The Osage cantered around the group, coming to where Hec stood eyeing Oliver Stamp.

"You all right?" the Indian asked Hec.

Hec rubbed at a place on the back of his hand where rock chips, blasted loose by a ricochet, had broken the skin. "Yeah, I'm all right," he drawled, his eyes still on Stamp, who was flushing slightly.

Turning his back, Hec walked up the draw to where his rifle had

landed in a tangle of buckbrush. He examined it quickly, then shoved his revolver into its holster and then returned to the group. By now the Osage was on the back of Arne Tornquist's horse. They would ride double into town.

Hec mounted and swung close to Stamp. Now that it was nearly over, he almost felt like grinning, but not quite. He feigned accusation.

"Thought we agreed you'd wait for us in town," Hec said.

Stamp lifted his shoulders; the badge pinned to the breast pocket of his coat caught the sunlight. "No, we just agreed I wouldn't come *along* with you," he said. "Didn't say anything about following you close enough to hear any gunfire."

"You're a word-bending schoolteacher, all right."

Stamp leaned over in the saddle. "Enright make a statement? Say why he tried to ambush you?"

"You can talk to him if you want. Me, I'd wait till we got to town. Let him sweat for a time. What about Steve Ritt? He got a fancy story to tell?"

"Says he was just hunting mountain lion."

"No mountain lion around here. Bobcats. A lot of skunks." He gave the pale Steve Ritt a scornful glance. "You got his handgun?"

Stamp produced it from his saddlebag. He passed it to Hec. Hec turned it over in his hand. "I think this'll have a story to tell. All we need."

Sergeant Mendoza looked skeptically at the gun, then at Hec. "A gun *talks*?"

"You'll see," Hec promised.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When one of his riders told him the news, Ben Ritt refused to believe any part of it. He had had a bad day. He'd been so boiling mad that he'd taken a pot shot at his own geologist and killed the man's horse. He had never even seen the damned Indian he had been hunting.

As he headed for town at a fast gallop, he knew that the trumped-up charges against his son could be laid at the doorstep of one man; the *tepee* step, if you wanted to be accurate.

Upon reaching town, Ben Ritt did not slow down, and his lathered horse was ready to drop by the time he reached Judge Tate's office.

Hec was in his laboratory when he heard the bellowing voices in the corridor. It was Ben Ritt and the Judge.

"You've got my son in your stinking jailhouse," Ritt was yelling, "and I demand ..."

"This is an outrage!" Tate added.

As Hec went about making preparations for a showdown of his own, it crossed his mind that there might be a matter of ethics involved. Judge Tate was not only on the local bench but also Ben Ritt's lawyer. Well, there were more important matters at hand, he knew, and he began tearing up strips of rags and placing them in an empty keg. He was preparing an experiment of sorts. Not so much an experiment, actually, as another example of the new science of crime detection.

He picked up a plaster cast from the table and went out into the corridor.

Stamp had been listening patiently to Ritt's tirade. Now he faced Hec. "Ready?"

Hec nodded. "Ready."

Stamp leaned close. "It better work," he whispered, "or I may be back teaching school soon."

Hec shrugged, looking at Ben Ritt's face, which was colored the violent red of summer sunsets.

Stamp beckoned for Ritt and the Judge to follow him. Hec led the way outside.

"Now what are you up to?" Ritt roared. "My son is in here! There's nothing for me to see outside!"

"Yes there is," Hec said over his shoulder.

Sergeant Mendoza was standing beside Steve Ritt's horse, which was hitched up at the rail in front of the building. Some curious

onlookers had gathered. While Ritt and the Judge stared, Hec handed the plaster cast to Stamp. The Chief took it, a grave look on his face.

"Sergeant, will you lift the animal's left front hoof, please?" Stamp asked.

Mendoza ducked under the tie rail and lifted the animal's forefoot. Stamp eased the plaster cast onto the hoof. It was a perfect fit.

Ritt began to splutter. "What kind of mumbo jumbo is that?"

"A means of identification," Stamp said.

"Hell with that!" Ritt roared. "You've got my son behind bars."

"I have," Stamp admitted calmly.

"Then you turn him loose!" Ritt's face reddened even more with his rage and indignation. Some people in the crowd obviously were enjoying the spectacle of an important man of the territory being pilloried.

"Afraid we can't turn him loose, Mr. Ritt," Stamp said.

"All I know is that my son was arrested. Isn't it about time you told what he's being charged with?"

"Suspicion of murder, sir," Stamp said quietly.

"Murder! That's the damnedest thing ..."

For the first time, Judge Tate spoke in a calm voice. "Easy, Ben," he warned Ritt. Then he turned to Stamp. "You got any kind of fact to hang that charge on?"

"Yes sir," Stamp nodded. "More than one, maybe. Hec Ramsey can give you the details."

"What's Ramsey got to do with this?" Ritt fumed. "He couldn't even conduct himself properly when my stage was held up. He let those damned road agents stick a gun in his face. Some law officer!"

"There was a woman aboard, Mr. Ritt," Hec reminded him through clenched teeth. "And a young boy."

Judge Tate was nudging Ritt to keep quiet. "Go ahead, Ramsey. I have a hunch what you're up to. But it's entirely without precedent in legal circles."

Hec gestured at the cast Stamp still held in his hand. "That is a plaster copy of a hoofprint we found at the scene of an attempted ambush." Hec pointed at the horse. "The hoofprint proves that it was this animal that the ambusher was riding. See the crack here in the shoe?" Hec lifted the animal's forefoot again to show them.

Judge Tate said, "I repeat, this is without precedent." But his voice had lost some of its steam.

Hec said to Ritt, "This is your son's horse."

"I know that." Ritt's mouth was twisted. "You could've made that

cast any time. An hour ago.”

“I was with Deputy Chief Ramsey when he made the cast,” Stamp said.

“Oliver, there’s lots of horses with cracked shoes,” Tate pointed out. “Even if you could prove this, which I doubt, it’s a long way from murder.”

“Yes sir,” Stamp said so politely that Tate’s eyebrows shot up. “We were just going to match this up with another test.” He gestured at the door of the police building. “Would you gentlemen come inside, please?”

“I’ve had about enough of this treatment!” Ritt said brusquely.

Judge Tate nudged him. “Come along, Ben. They have no case. Not yet, anyway.”

As they started inside, Stamp turned and said to Mendoza, “Juan, you better bring Steve to our demonstration room.”

“Demonstration room,” Ritt mocked. “Christ, I liked it better in the old days, when we had a sheriff and a man was either guilty or innocent. You didn’t go around pouring plaster into hoofprints.”

“Hit a man often enough with your fists,” Stamp said, “and he’ll confess to most anything.” He gave Ritt a look. “That’s how it was done a lot of times in the so-called good old days.”

They all filed into the building, Ritt silent now because Judge Tate was talking to him in low and warning tones. Ritt’s mouth was a pale line across his flushed face.

In the room set aside for his laboratory, Hec said, “Look at this.” He held up a weapon. “We took this Colt from your son’s holster. You recognize it, Mr. Ritt?”

“Of course. I gave it to him on his twentieth birthday. Its’ got his initials on the barrel ...”

“*Ben!*” Judge Tate gave a warning shake of the head. Ben Ritt locked his lips.

His son was brought into the room at that moment. Young Ritt was pale but defiant. “You all right, boy?” Ritt asked.

“Yeah,” Steve mumbled.

“You’ve admitted it’s his gun,” Hec reminded.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s his gun. So what?”

Judge Tate glared at Ritt, still trying to get him to shut up. But Ben Ritt was watching Hec take the revolver and fire it into the barrel stuffed with rags. The roar of the gun startled those not expecting the shot.

Judge Tate looked stern. “What kind of legerdemain is this?” he

demanded.

Hec didn't reply. He dug into the barrel and retrieved the hot bullet, juggling it from one hand to the other. When it had cooled, he put the bullet down on the long oaken table. Then he picked up one of the matchboxes he had removed from the trunk.

"This is the bullet Doc Coogan took out of Mrs. Vandemeer," he told them "You can see that Doc initialed it."

Judge Tate started forward to have a closer look at the bullet, but Ritt blocked him. He wanted to be the first to examine it. Frowning, he stared at the scratches Coogan had made in the chunk of soft lead. The scratched "A. C." was clearly visible.

"I don't care about any of this," Ben Ritt said heavily. He turned to his son and studied him a moment. Steve was wiping at the sweat on his forehead and upper lip. "What're they talkin' about, boy?" Ritt asked his son. "Did you have anything to do with that Vandemeer business?" For the first time, Ritt's voice was without bluster.

"No. I was just out huntin' this morning. Maybe took a few wild shots. And suddenly they were all over me!"

Ritt apparently accepted his son's story. He watched Hec place the bullets under his microscope.

Judge Tate looked hard at Steve. "What about your horse being out there where Ramsey was shot at?"

"Wasn't my horse. And it sure wasn't me. Why'd I want to *do* a thing like that?"

Hec turned to Judge Tate. "Your Honor?" He gestured at the microscope.

Judge Tate hesitated, then crossed to the table. He peered through the microscope at the two bullets side by side on the tray.

Hec said, "The one with Doc Coogan's initials killed Helen Vandemeer. The other bullet is the one I just fired out of Steve's gun."

Judge Tate drew back from the microscope. His features were leaden as he turned to Ritt. "Peas in a pod, Ben."

Ben Ritt had his own look. When he looked up at his son, his florid features had turned ashen. He stared at Steve for a long time. The look seemed to rattle the younger man.

Finally Steve Ritt cried, "No!" He shook his head violently from side to side. "That don't mean I did it! I mean, somebody could've taken my gun, couldn't they? Yeah, I remember now, my gun was lost for a couple of days. Yeah, and I was ..."

Ben Ritt seized his son by the shoulders and shook him. "Son, for God's sake, tell me the truth! How can I help you if you don't tell me the truth!"

"I *am* tellin' the truth!"

"Steve, tell me," Ben Ritt persisted.

The young man lowered his head, his shoulders trembling. "I didn't go there to kill 'em, Pa. I swear."

"What *did* you go there for, boy?"

"I was just tryin' to deal tough. Like you. And then the woman stampeded, and ... Oh, God, I didn't mean it."

He crumpled into his father's arms, sobbing uncontrollably.

Hec placed the bullets in their matchboxes, his face grave. He figured Steve Ritt was telling the truth, that he hadn't premeditated the murders. Later they learned that Steve had made a deal with Earl Enright to cover up the next-of-kin because Helen Vandemeer had a married sister with five children living in Virginia. This made the land agent an accessory after the fact. And then there was the fact that Steve Ritt had tried to kill Hec on the night Hec had been at the oil derrick. Not to mention Steve and Enright ambushing Hec and the Osage that very morning.

When Steve was returned to his cell, Ben Ritt had nothing to say. As if in a daze, he left the police building. Judge Tate lingered a moment to shake hands with Stamp and Hec.

"Good day, gentlemen," he said gravely, and left to join Ben Ritt, who stood on the walk staring into space.

When they were gone, Stamp looked at Hec. A shyness seemed to come over both men. Hec was packing his trunk.

"You still leaving?" Stamp said softly.

"Thought that was what we both wanted."

"I want to finish what I started here. And your going won't make it easy." Stamp paused. "Especially now."

Hec gave him a wry smile. "You asking me to stay as the lesser evil?"

"I don't want the town voting for a sheriff instead of a police department in the next election. Some of the things you've done gave me the idea you want the same thing."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't say that you're crazy about me."

"You wouldn't believe that even if it were true."

Hec studied him with a skeptical squint, then made his decision. "Okay, Chief or sir. Let's try it one more time."

Oliver Stamp put out his hand. Hesitating a moment, Hec accepted it. He gave the Chief a hard handshake.

Then he said, "Somethin' I want to do, Chief."

Within minutes he was entering the pharmacy down the block. He

noticed that Nora Muldoon, waiting on a woman, seemed overly tight and controlled. Hec stood around, staring at the shelves of drugs in glass bottles. Finally Nora came over to him.

“You’re back,” she said tensely.

“Where’s Andy?”

“Off playing.” She took a deep breath, and he could see her throat working. “I’ll say your goodbyes for you. He’ll be sorry he missed you.”

Hec frowned at her. “What’re you talking about?”

“What I heard. That you’re leaving.”

Hec looked surprised, then said narrowly, “Oh? Does that bother you?”

She looked annoyed. “I wish you a safe journey.” She whirled around and started for the back of the shop. He caught her by the arm and spun her with such force that a hairpin popped loose and fell to the floor with a small metallic sound.

“Nora, I don’t figure on going anywhere. ’Cept maybe to your kitchen for a cup of coffee.”

Instant pleasure touched her pretty face. Then suddenly she seemed annoyed. “Then why did you let me think ...”

“Nora!” he said with mock anger. “Do we have to fight in public?” He broke into a grin.

She studied him a moment, then smiled. “No, I guess not, Hec,” she said softly and led him toward the rear of the pharmacy, to the living quarters she shared with her son.